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ALL-NEW ISSUE

THE OLD HADDOCK	H. R. F. Keating	6
THE THEFT OF THE SATIN JURY	Edward D. Hoch	17
VICIOUS CIRCLE	Robert Edward Eckels	35
THE BLUE AND GRAY CLUB	Robert S. Aldrich	44
"ENFANTS TERRIBLES"	R. A. Lafferty	53
IN NO OTHER PLACE	Muriel Ludlow Olson	67
THE WRONG FOX	Michael Gilbert	74
BAD SPOT	Dante Stirpe	98
ADVENTURES OF HERBIE AND BIG SAL	Len Gray	109
THE REAL SHAPE OF THE COAST	John Lutz	115
THE STRAY BULLET	Gary Brandner	126
THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP MYSTERY	Mr. X	130
MR. STRANG FINDS AN ANGLE	William Brittain	145
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	72
INDEX TO VOLUME FIFTY-SEVEN		161–160

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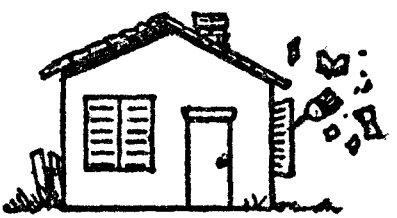

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THE OLD HADDOCK

by H. R. F. KEATING

THERE WAS NO PLEASing the Old Haddock, thought Sergeant Prowdon as he sent the big Daimler pushing fast through the quiet summer night of the deserted Kentish lanes.

All right, so they had to get the old fogey out of his bed. But he was meant to be a policeman same as anybody else, even if he should have been retired long ago.

Sitting forward half an inch more over the wheel, the sergeant pushed up their speed another three miles an hour.

At least it should not take long to get there.

"Well," he said aloud, "we'll be on the scene in five minutes now, Inspector."

The Old Haddock sat there beside him hunched in his dark overcoat—an overcoat in midsummer, would you believe it!—and with his invariable bowler hat tilted forward over his eyes. And he said not a word.

Sergeant Prowdon concentrated on the hedge-shrouded road ahead.

If the Old Haddock didn't want to talk to him, then the sergeant could stay silent with the best of them.

And at once the old boy spoke. "Tottenham," he said. "Refresh my memory, Sergeant. I must be getting old."

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Prowdon blinked. "Don't quite get you, Inspector."

"Get you," the Old Haddock snorted. "What sort of expression is that? An Americanism, I suppose."

"Land of progress, sir," Prowdon said, determined not to give in to the old idiot on everything.

"Progress," came a snort from his side. "I see they're putting on stage shows now about the family of that Chicago gangster they shot some time ago. Well, that's not the sort of progress we want in good old England, thank you very much."

"No, Inspector."

The Old Haddock.

"And I asked you a question, Sergeant."

Prowdon braked sharply as the gates of a big house showed up in the Daimler's headlights.

"Sorry, sir. Can't quite—"

"I asked what you knew about Mr. Miles Tottenham, Sergeant. The man whose house you're driving us to at this ridiculous speed."

Prowdon bit back the expletive that rose to his lips.

"Mr. Tottenham," he said, "he's the famous explorer, sir. There's bits about him in the *Kentish Times* every now and again."

"Yes, Sergeant, I am well aware that Mr. Tottenham is a famous explorer. But there's something else about him I can't quite lay my tongue to. Something not entirely to his credit."

"That would be his mutiny, sir," Prowdon said, pleased with himself for being able to recall details that had defeated the Old Haddock.

"Yes," he continued, as more big houses began to show up one by one in the leafy darkness on either side. "Yes, he was out all on his own in the Amazon or somewhere, and his bearers—if that's what the poor bloody devils are called—wanted to turn back. So he started shooting 'em one by one. Shot hundreds before he got his way, so they say."

"Not hundreds, Sergeant."

Prowdon darted the Old Haddock a glance of fury.

"Thought you couldn't recollect the circumstances, sir."

"No more I can, Sergeant. But I've still got a bit of brains in my head. If Mr. Tottenham had hundreds of natives with him he wouldn't have just been exploring; he'd have been a general in charge of an Expeditionary Force. And we've never conquered South America yet."

"It was just a figure of speech, sir," Prowdon explained.

"Exactly, Sergeant."

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The Old Haddock.

Then on the grass bank, beside a big pair of open gates, the sergeant spotted a narrow board with the words *Fair Acres* painted on it.

"This'll be it then, sir," he said. "Sir Ellis What's-his-name should be waiting for us somewhere."

"Sir Ellis Sturge, Sergeant."

The Old Haddock straightened his bowler.

Going to go all "family retainer" on us, I suppose, Prowdon thought. Just because the fellow's been Governor of some colony or other. And off any day to exploit another one, too.

He turned the big car in at the gates and advanced along the drive, their headlights showing up plentiful signs of the comfortable life—the gravel ahead immaculately weed-free, the big flower border with every clump of plants well staked and tied, the discreet outhouse, now the gardeners' toolshed no doubt, to judge by the spade plunged in the ground by its padlocked door.

"Now just tell me once again exactly what that message was," the Old Haddock said, with heavy emphasis on the "exactly."

"Give it to you word for word if you want, Inspector."

"I do want."

Prowdon brought the car to a halt, revved up the engine, and switched off. He sat up to attention in the darkness and recited.

"Message received by telephone at 1:22 a.m. Caller's name: Sir Ellis Sturge. Message ran: 'You the C.I.D.? Good. Then you'd better get round here pretty quickly. I've just found a body. Dead. Head knocked in with a bloody shovel, right in the middle of the lawn. Place called The Laurels—god-awful name. But you'd better report to the house next door. Fair Acres, Mr. Miles Tottenham. That's where I'm phoning from. Got that? Good. Then at the double, if you please.' End of message."

In the middle of the dark mass in front of them that was the house a sudden oblong of yellow light appeared as the big front door abruptly swung open.

A figure came out and strode toward them. He was a man of exceptional height, a good six foot three, and he held himself with the erectness that only long training can achieve. It was difficult to make out the man's features but the white hair of his bare head stood out clearly in the light of a cloud hidden moon.

"You the police wallahs?"

Sergeant Prowdon winced at

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the exaggeratedly drawling tone of the voice—that arrogantly bland voice-of-command that had once ruled a world-straddling empire.

But the Old Haddock slipped out of the car and ran round to the front at a respectful crouch, his rapidly removed bowler held crown outward in front of him.

"Inspector from the Chislehurst C.I.D., sir," he said. "Am I addressing Sir Ellis Sturge?"

"Certainly you are. I sent for you, didn't I? And now you are here, you'd better listen pretty hard. Can only spare you two minutes. Got to be at Croydon in half an hour."

He extended a large bony fist, twisted his wrist round, and peered at the watch on it.

"Twenty-eight minutes, actually," he said.

"At Croydon, sir, at two o'clock in the morning?"

Even the Old Haddock can't keep up the respectful tone all the time, Prowdon reflected cheerfully.

"Imperial Airways," Sir Ellis said loftily. "Got to catch one of their planes. Taking up my term of office in Umpala."

"Oh, yes, of course, Sir Ellis."

The Old Haddock gave a little jab of a bow over the clasped bowler.

"Where's your notebook then?" Sir Ellis demanded.

And the Old Haddock actually turned sharply round and barked. "Notebook, Sergeant, notebook."

Prowdon pulled the notebook from his pocket, flipped it open, and stood waiting. As if in answer to an unspoken order from Sir Ellis, a full and golden summer moon came out from behind a cloud to give him enough light to write by. He licked the tip of his pencil.

"Very well," Sir Ellis said. "I was spending the evening in the furnished house I had rented for my leave next door when my neighbor here, Miles Tottenham, came round and invited me over for a farewell drink. At about a quarter past one I left, intending to get into my car and drive over to Croydon. But I decided to take a last look round outside the house—make sure it didn't look too inviting to a burglar. Certain responsibility in these things, you know. And when I got round to the back I saw this chappie. Dead, of course. Made sure of that. Spanish, I should say. But a sahib all right. Wearing evening dress. So I came straight back round here and got on to you people."

He shot out his left fist again in the same brusque gesture and regarded his watch.

"Have to leave now," he announced. "Strict about time of

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arrival at Croydon. Quite right, of course. And it would never do if the airplane arrived at Umpala, chiefs all gathered waiting to greet me, tribesmen camping there for days, and I didn't present myself on parade."

He shot a quick glance back at the still-open front door of the big house behind him.

"Tottenham'll tell you anything you want to know," he said. "Show you where to look, et cetera, et cetera. And if there is anything you want from me, Government House, Umpala, will find me. Though of course I mustn't be asked to give evidence."

He put his fine beak-nosed head up into the air and inhaled the scents of the night.

"Good night to you."

And off he strode out of the open gates. A moment or two later the sound of a car engine being brought briskly to life broke the stillness of the night.

And the Old Haddock had just stood there lapping it up, Prowdon thought. Lets a key witness simply walk out on him just because the feller's a bloody nob.

He watched as his superior officer carefully replaced his well-brushed bowler, and then he offered up a silent prayer that the old fogey was not going to let the explorer trample over him, too.

He followed while the Old Haddock marched up the steps of the house, rang at the bell beside the open front door, and remained punctiliously on the visitors' side of the threshold.

But they did not have long to wait.

Scarcely had the sound of the bell pealed out loudly in the empty hall—there seemed to be nothing but trophies of the chase everywhere in it, tiger and leopard skins, horned heads, diamond-shaped shields made from stretched hides, and crossed pairs of native spears—when they heard the sound of heavy feet on the well-carpeted stairs, and Miles Tottenham, the explorer, appeared.

It could be no one else. He was a man of about 50, so broad-shouldered as to be almost squat, with a face reddened by a thousand tropic suns, a tuft of ginger mustache on his upper lip, and gingery hair springing up all round a balding head. He wore a jacket, waistcoat, and plus-fours of an aggressive brown check.

"Ha," he said, as soon as he saw his visitors, "you're the police. Sturge gone then?"

"Sir Ellis had to be at Croydon Aerodrome by two o'clock, as I daresay you know, Mr. Tottenham," the Old Haddock said, swiftly removing the bowler once again.

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"Yes, yes. Damned inconvenient for the poor bloke," Tottenham replied. "You'll see he's kept well out of this, won't you?"

"You can count on our discretion, sir," the Old Haddock chipped in, quick as a wink.

You bet, Prowdon thought. You can see this Tottenham fellow's never had anything to do but go off and make life hell for a lot of natives. And no doubt coming back richer each time, too. There are some thieves you'll never get behind bars; murderers, too, come to that. Look at the way he shot all those bearers.

"You'll want to see the body straight off," Tottenham said as he stamped down the outside steps. "Sturge tells me it's some sort of foreigner. Wearing a dinner jacket, too."

He made a curious strangled gurgling sound.

"Heaven knows what he was doing next door in the garden at The Laurels," he added.

"I shouldn't wonder if that becomes plain enough once we find out who he is," the Old Haddock said equably. "Routine inquiries generally bring us our answers in the end."

Miles Tottenham issued a sound which Prowdon decided could only be a snort of pure derision.

"Daresay that's true enough of your quiet English crimes," he trumpeted. "But it would hardly do in the parts of the world I'm more at home in. Question of acting pretty damn quickly there, or getting nowhere. Had some trouble of this sort in New Guinea once. Got every soul in the place out in front of me soon as I saw the body. Went along the lines of 'em. Spotted one black man trembling like a leaf. Grabbed him by the hair of his head. 'Well, what you makum kill for, fella?' Had a confession out of him on the spot."

"Indeed, sir. Most interesting."

Tramping glumly behind the pair of them, Prowdon wondered which one he would like to kick harder.

They turned in at the next-door gates of The Laurels and the explorer led them round to the garden behind. And there on the lawn, plain to see in the moonlight, was the body.

"Daresay I should have mounted guard here," Tottenham said. "Bit awkward really. Didn't want to leave old Sturge to cope on his own, not when he'd got to get away and all that. And then I've a young wife at home, too. Never do for her to come down and find me not there. No servants in the place, of course. All sleep out nowadays."

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"Well, no harm's been done in any event, sir," the Old Haddock said soothingly. "Murder weapon beside the body by the looks of it."

He knelt on one knee on the silvery grass of the moonlit lawn and looked closely at the weapon which lay about two yards from the sprawled body. It was a long-handled coal shovel of wrought iron, black-leaded, and blood was clearly visible on the blade. It certainly looked heavy enough to have inflicted the considerable injury that the dead man's head had received.

Tottenham stood behind the Old Haddock and peered down at the shovel morosely.

"Here, wait a minute," he said suddenly. "I believe I know where that comes from. It's from The Laurels itself. Seen it dozens of times with my own eyes. Saw it tonight, come to that, when I called for Sturge."

The Old Haddock glanced quickly at the big darkened house.

"Sergeant," he said, "take a quick look-see, would you? Any sign of forcible entry. You know what to keep an eye open for."

Prowdon headed for the house, taking care not to hurry himself.

If the murder weapon came from the house which Sir Ellis Sturge had lived in, he reasoned, then it was plain as could be that Sir Ellis should never have been permitted to drive away like that without so much as a by-your-leave. Just because he was going out to govern a lot of natives, it didn't mean he was above committing murder. Especially when the business looked unpremeditated, too, with that great gash in the victim's head and the weapon flung down beside him like that.

Across the lawn in the quiet of the night he heard Miles Tottenham's bark of a voice.

"Good lord, Inspector, I know the chappie! It's young Mendez, Roberto Mendez. Bit of what you might call a society figure, though bit of a foreigner too. I'd met him at soirées and so forth."

"Had you indeed, sir. Well, that's most helpful, most helpful."

Prowdon stopped in front of a pair of French windows that led from the house out onto the lawn, and then stared at them in sudden interest.

He turned and called across the lawn.

"French windows broken open here, Inspector. Wood all splintered round the lock. Looks as if it might've been done with a spade or something."

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The Old Haddock, who was still down on one knee beside the body, rose and was flicking at the dampened blue serge of his stiffly creased trousers in a preoccupied way.

"Just take a quick look inside and see if you can spot the companion pieces to the weapon," he called back. "Don't touch the evidence, mind."

Don't touch the evidence, don't touch the evidence, Prowdon muttered to himself. When does he think I was born?

Gently he opened the French windows with the edge of his pocketknife and then stepped into the room beyond. The moonlight that flooded in from directly behind him showed him what he wanted at first glance. He went across to the fireplace. There, laid neatly on the hearth, was a long poker and a pair of tongs, each in the same design as the coal shovel.

He went back outside to report.

But before he had got across to where the Old Haddock was taking a careful look at the dead man's battered head, kneeling on the other knee this time, a quite unexpected figure burst on the scene.

"Miles. Miles. Miles, what is it? What's happening?"

A young woman had come running into the garden, wearing nothing more than a blue silk kimono wrapped round her nightdress. She was blonde and boyish, about 25, Prowdon guessed. A somewhat surprising wife for a sandy old devil like Miles Tottenham.

At the sound of her voice the explorer had run toward her. He endeavored now to interpose his solid stubby frame between her and the body. But vainly, since she was in any case half a head the taller.

"Unfortunate accident," he said in the sort of voice people like him kept for addressing dogs and the less intelligent members of the servant class.

"But what is it, Miles? That man's hurt, isn't he? Is he dead?"

"No, no. Nothing at all for you to worry about, my dear. Now just you let me take you back to bed while the police chappies get on with their job."

"Police? Then it *is* someone dead. He's wearing evening dress, too. Miles, is it someone we know?"

"Now don't you bother your pretty little head with it," the ginger-haired explorer said. "You just come back indoors, and you can make us both some tea or something."

"No."

Her voice rang out sharply in the moon-soaked night.

"June, go back at once!"

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But Tottenham's bark had absolutely no effect. His wife broke free from the hand that held her elbow and ran across the lawn toward the body.

Three yards away from it she stopped abruptly.

"Bobby," she said. "It's Bobby. I was right!"

She flung herself down toward the sprawled form.

"Oh, my darling. My darling."

The Old Haddock acted pretty quickly, Prowdon had to hand him that. Before the girl could touch the body he had his arm there, rigidly extended, holding her back.

Her husband came striding up behind her, seized both her elbows, and pulled her to her feet.

"Get back home, you slut," he exploded.

Again she broke from his grasp. But this time she wheeled to face him.

"You," she said tremblingly. "You killed him."

She stared at him, her eyes widening and widening.

"You murderer," she spat. "You bloody murderer. Bobby thought you were going to be away. He must have come in through our back gate, and you saw him. You saw him and you killed him."

Suddenly she launched herself forward, hands up, nails clawing. Prowdon had to run up, grab her, and haul her away with all his strength. He kept a firm hold on her while the explorer wiped away the blood from a long scratch running all the way down his right cheek.

"I'm sorry you think so badly of me, my dear," he said. "But the fact of the matter is, I'm the one person who couldn't have killed that unpleasant young man. We've just this moment established that. He was hit with that coal shovel you see lying there, and that was stolen just before the crime from The Laurels here. Now ever since old Sturge left this place I've been in his company. I went and fetched him and I stayed with him all along till just before he found the body. And in any case I wouldn't dirty my hands killing a creature like that. Horsewhip him, yes. I might horsewhip both of you. But he wasn't fit for killing."

Prowdon had to hold the girl even more tightly at this. Afterward he was to recall the feel of her young struggling body through the thin silks of her kimono and nightdress. But at the time he had no moment to spare for any thoughts except how to make sure she did not wriggle free.

Mercifully the sound of a car drawing up in the road outside came to their ears.

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"Ah," said the Old Haddock, "that'll be the police surgeon. I think perhaps we'd all better go back next door."

Once again they walked in a procession. This time the Old Haddock led the way. Prowdon followed keeping an uncompromising grip on Mrs. Tottenham's left arm, and the explorer brought up the rear. They stopped when they reached the doctor's car and the Old Haddock explained to him, in what Prowdon thought was an unnecessarily tactful way, that Mrs. Tottenham needed attention and that Fair Acres should therefore be his first port of call.

They set off with the doctor. But to Prowdon's surprise the Old Haddock tapped the sergeant on the arm.

"A word with you, my lad," he said.

Prowdon released Mrs. Tottenham, who seemed more subdued now. The Old Haddock waited in silence till she had reached the gates of her own house. Then he turned sharply to Prowdon.

"Right, Sergeant," he said. "I want you to get that coal shovel, pick it up so that any possible fingerprints are left intact, put it in the car, and drive like hell over to Croydon. I'll get in touch with Imperial Airways on the telephone and try to hold up Sir Ellis' flight. If you get to him in time I want you to show him that shovel. Understand?"

"Show him—but what do I say?"

"Just show it to him. And hurry. You haven't got a moment to lose if he's not to get away."

Standing beside the big airplane with its four powerful motors thrumming hard and the great airfield spread out all around in the darkness, Sergeant Prowdon held the coal shovel out to Sir Ellis Sturge.

Sir Ellis took one quick look at it.

"But that isn't the weapon at all," he said irritatedly. "That's one of the fireirons from that god-awful house. What in heaven's name have you brought me that for?"

And then Prowdon saw it all.

Sir Ellis had found Roberto Mendez, his head knocked in "with a bloody shovel," right in the middle of the lawn. "With a bloody shovel" had been a mere figure of speech. No doubt the weapon had been something more like a spade—like the spade that had been used to force the French windows at The Laurels.

And, of course, that meant that the fiery Miles Tottenham could no longer claim he had

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not had access to the weapon that killed Mendez. His wife had said that her Bobby had probably come in through the back gate at Fair Acres. Of course he had, and had encountered the hot-tempered explorer who had snatched up a spade, killed Mendez, and then carried the body and weapon to The Laurels garden next door to misdirect the official investigation.

Then later, quick-witted as he was, when he had heard Sir Ellis' exaggerations and figure of speech on the telephone, he had taken extraordinary advantage of them by dodging back to The Laurels, using the murder spade to break in and get hold of the alibi-providing shovel, pressing the shovel into the wound before throwing it down beside the body, and finally, yes, taking the telltale spade back with him and simply plunging it into the cleansing earth right outside his own toolshed.

Fantastically quick and clever, he'd been.

And, damn it all, the Old Haddock had seen through everything. No, not "the old Haddock." More like "the cunning old devil." Call a spade a spade.

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a NEW Nick Velvet by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the 11th unusual theft planned and executed by that mastercrook, Nick Velvet. In his newest adventure Nick steals 15 people—the 12 jurors, the one alternate juror, and the two court attendants in a bizarre trial—a trial for murder in which a duel is fought in a reproduction of the famous yew-hedged maze at Hampton Court Palace. And once again Nick Velvet must prove himself a crackerjack criminologist as well as a crackerjack criminal—he has to double as a detective in order to succeed as a thief . . .

THE THEFT OF THE SATIN JURY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

NICK VELVET HAD paid little attention to the Satin case during its run of newspaper publicity the previous winter. He'd been involved in other things, and a murder case—even one with as many bizarre angles as the Satin shooting—could divert him for only a limited time. It was a winter of discontent for Nick, with a journey halfway around the world to Australia that had gone sour when his client inconveniently died of a heart attack before arranging to pay the balance of Nick's fee.

The spring had been better, though, and by the time the Satin case came to trial in early June, Nick's good spirits had returned. He even took time to listen one evening while Gloria ran over the events of the case as they had been reported in the press. "Can you imagine, Nicky? This woman Helen Satin claims she killed her husband's lover in a *duel!* It's like something out of the Middle Ages!"

"I don't think women fought duels in the Middle Ages," Nick observed. "Just men. And duels reached the peak of their popularity in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries—after the Middle Ages."

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"You know everything, don't you, Nicky?"

He only smiled. "Sometime I'll tell you about the basic code duello for the pistol duel, adopted at Tipperary, in Ireland, about 1775. After the passing of the classic sword duel, pistol duels became quite popular in England, Ireland, and France—and even in America. Of course German students in this century revived the classic saber duel."

"But Nicky—in the 1970's, here in America?"

"I'll admit the present circumstances are unusual, which I guess is why the police questioned her story in the first place. Gregory Satin hardly seems the sort of man that women fight duels over. Anyway, it'll be an interesting trial."

Two weeks later, Nick Velvet was to find out exactly how interesting. On the day the prosecution opened its case, Nick found himself having lunch with a conservatively dressed businessman named Adam Whipple.

"Of course you're familiar with the Satin case," Whipple said over cocktails, coming right to the point.

"I've read something about it. I suppose every newspaper in the country has been following it."

"Then you know the trial has begun."

"Yes."

Whipple sipped his drink. "I understand, Mr. Velvet, that you steal things," he said softly.

Nick glanced around, but there was no one within earshot. "I've been known to. But never money or jewelry, or anything of purely monetary value."

"Some say you once stole an entire baseball team."

Nick's eyes twinkled for an instant. "Do they really say that?"

"Mr. Velvet, could you steal the jury in the Satin case?"

Nick sat back in his chair, thinking. "The entire jury?"

"The entire jury. Twelve jurors and one alternate."

"I could do it," Nick decided, "as long as you did not intend to hold them for ransom or otherwise profit financially."

Whipple seemed surprised at such quick and easy agreement. "You understand the jury is sequestered. They're constantly guarded by two court attendants—male and female—and they're locked in hotel rooms at night. That's so they're not influenced by all the newspaper publicity about the case."

"It'll be a problem, but I think I can manage it," Nick said. "What do you want done with them?"

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"Just held for a day or two and then released. I'll notify you where you can bring them."

"Are you hoping for a mistrial? They'll only try her again, you know "

Adam Whipple, whose expression at its best could hardly be called friendly, frowned and tilted his balding head slightly. "I understand you charge a great deal of money, Mr. Velvet. For that sum I do not expect questions or opinions or suggestions."

"All right."

"You'll do it then?"

"I'll do it," Nick said.

The courtroom was crowded to capacity, and Nick had found it necessary to bribe his way into the spectators' line in order to gain admittance. It was the second day of the prosecution's case, and he sat behind two snickering housewives listening to the testimony of the detective who had investigated the case. He was a tall sharp-featured man named Reager, and he talked exactly the way a detective should talk under the circumstances.

"May I refer to my notes to refresh my memory?" he asked the prosecuting attorney, and when permission was granted he flipped open a little black notebook, glanced quickly at it, and then began to talk. "It was on the sixteenth of January, shortly after midnight, that I was summoned to the country estate of Gregory Satin."

"And who summoned you, Detective Reager?"

"The Sheriff's deputy on patrol out there. He was the first one on the scene. When I arrived I observed the deputy standing with Mrs. Satin near the entrance to this maze—"

"Suppose you describe the maze for the jury."

Nick let his eyes wander to the jury box, where the twelve men and women sat in rapt attention. It was too early in the day, and too interesting a case, for them to be fidgeting yet. He noted there were eight men and four women, plus another woman alternate seated next to them because the jury box held only twelve persons.

His mind shifted back to the witness stand in time to hear the detective saying, "—the maze was constructed of tall yew hedges, seven feet high. I understand Mr. Satin laid it out to duplicate one in the gardens of England's Hampton Court Palace. Mrs. Satin told me she'd entered the maze shortly after eleven p.m., armed with a revolver."

"That would have been approximately one hour before you arrived?"

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"Yes, sir." He cleared his throat. "I cautioned Mrs. Satin as to her rights—"

"Why did you think that was necessary?"

"The Sheriff's deputy who'd been first on the scene found a revolver in the snow near her, and she admitted to firing it. I questioned her further, and she told me she'd entered the maze about five minutes ahead of the dead woman, Laura Indris. The snow had stopped by that time, and there was a full moon, which enabled them to make their way between the rows of hedges. After about a half hour they found each other in the center of the maze, and both fired. Mrs. Satin shot Miss Indris dead, hitting her in the back with a single shot, apparently just as Miss Indris turned to run."

"Did Mrs. Satin refer to the shooting as a duel?"

"Yes, she did. She said they'd fought a duel."

"And where was Mr. Satin at this time?"

"He was away from the house on business. He returned home shortly before one a.m., during my questioning of Mrs. Satin."

Nick rose from his last-row seat and slipped quietly out the door. He could already see that it would be a fairly long trial. Though a duel in a maze by moonlight, fought over the love of a man, certainly had its bizarre aspects, what concerned him at the moment was the jury.

He chose a position on the sun-drenched plaza overlooking the courthouse entrance, where he could observe them on their way to lunch. He'd already decided that stealing them from the courtroom itself was impossible. Stealing them from their hotel at night would be equally impossible, with the jurors scattered in several rooms. He had to kidnap them together, and get away fast.

"Well!" a voice spoke suddenly behind him. "It's Nick Velvet himself!"

Nick recognized the voice even before he turned his head. It was that of Lieutenant Charlie Weston of the Eastbridge police, the only police detective in the entire northeast who knew him by sight, and knew what he did for a living. "Hello, Charlie. I thought you were in Eastbridge."

"I'm here on police business, delivering a bank robber to them. While I was in town I thought I'd just look in on the Satin trial. Funny thing, I saw you leaving just as I got to the door."

Nick shrugged. "Same as you. I just looked in on it."

The detective frowned at

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him, squinting his eyes against the sun. "I haven't come across you since the Brazen Letters affair, Nick. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"This and that."

"Still stealing?"

"Now, Charlie!"

"What's your interest in the Satin case, Nick?"

"Just curiosity, nothing more."

"Somebody hire you to steal something?"

"What is there to steal in a courtroom during a murder trial?"

Charlie Weston thought about that. "Nothing I can think of, but you usually manage to find something."

Nick managed to grin at him. "This time I'm on vacation."

"Make sure it stays that way. I'm going to notify the local police that you're nosing around, just in case." He turned and walked away, leaving Nick standing in the sunlight.

It was not so much the presence of Charlie Weston in the vicinity as it was the sheer impossibility of the assignment that came to bother Nick as the day wore on. The jury was transported to each of its meals in a closed white van that looked like a cross between a police wagon and an armored car. And although the two court attendants were unarmed, they watched the twelve jurors and the alternate like a pair of hawks. At dinner one sat at each end of the table, making certain that no one approached the jurors or spoke to them. Even the orders to the waiter were given only under the closest supervision.

But there was a single ray of hope. The white van that transported them back and forth the three blocks between courthouse and restaurant was apparently owned by the restaurant—or more exactly, by the motel of which the restaurant was a part. Each time it dropped them off, the driver returned it to the motel parking lot. When Nick observed this he smiled slightly and began to hum a little tune. He knew how the Satin jury could be stolen—all of them—and it was amazingly simple.

It took Nick another two days to work out the details, and in that time the prosecution rested its case against Helen Satin. On the morning the defense called its first witness, Nick was in the courtroom, taking a final look at the jury. He had to be able to recognize them, that was sure!

The lead-off defense witness was Gregory Satin himself, a towering man who spoke in a voice that boomed out against

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the walls of the crowded courtroom. Satin was one of the current crop of self-made millionaires—a skillful businessman and electronics engineer who had parlayed a small computer business into a multimillion-dollar chain of time-sharing offices in every major city of the country. The newspapers liked to call Gregory Satin "The Computer King," and he was not modest enough to offer any objections to that designation.

"Tell me, Mr. Satin," the defense counsel opened, "just why did you construct this maze in your garden?"

The tall man let go with his booming voice. "I visited the maze at Hampton Court Palace some years back, and it fascinated me. When we needed something to fill in a large section of our garden, Helen and I both remembered the maze. It was planted with yew hedges about eight years ago."

"Your wife knew her way through the maze?"

"Of course. We both did."

The defense attorney paused for a moment and then continued, "Now tell us, Mr. Satin, in your own words—just what was your relationship with the deceased woman?"

"I had been—uh—living with Laura Indris with some regularity for almost a year."

"You say with some regularity?"

"About two or three times a month. She wanted me to divorce Helen and marry her."

"And you refused?"

"I did. In fact, I was in the process of breaking off the affair when Helen discovered it."

"After she discovered it, did she make any threats against Laura Indris?"

"No. On the contrary, the only threat was made by Laura. She told me if Helen wouldn't divorce me she'd kill her."

There was an audible hum from the spectators, although the jury remained impassive. The judge banged his gavel and then the defense questioning continued. "She actually threatened your wife's life?"

"That's correct."

"Now, Mr. Satin, will you tell us in your own words exactly what happened on the night of January 15th and the early morning of the 16th?"

"Laura had been threatening to come out to the house, to confront Helen and settle the question of a divorce once and for all. But I didn't really think she would, and I certainly wasn't expecting her that night. For one thing, it was snowing and the driving was bad. Around ten o'clock I received a call from my office in town.

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There was a problem with our new British branch that had to be settled at once. I drove into town for a conference and ended up phoning London, getting my branch manager out of bed at five in the morning, their time. It was still snowing when I started home, just after midnight, and I had to drive slowly. When I reached home there were two police cars in the driveway. A detective named Reager told me what had happened."

When the judge adjourned the court for lunch, Nick decided he'd studied the jurors' faces long enough. He didn't really need to return in the afternoon, but the case was beginning to fascinate him. He wanted to hear Helen Satin tell about that duel. And so, when court resumed after lunch, he was back in his last-row seat. The woman who'd been only a head at the defense table now rose and took the stand, revealing a youthful, dark-haired beauty that the newspaper photos had only hinted at. In fact, Helen Satin was so classically lovely in her black dress and pale makeup that Nick wondered how any man could desert her for another woman.

She began to speak in a voice so low the judge had to instruct her to talk louder. "I thought we were very happy. The way I learned about Laura Indris was such a foolish thing, I almost had to laugh. They'd stayed at a New York hotel together one night, registering as Mr. and Mrs. Satin. She had a distinctive travel alarm clock in a red leather case, and she left it in the room. Of course the hotel returned it to me, and I recognized it at once.

"I showed the clock to Gregory and he admitted everything. We even discussed the possibility of a divorce, but I told him quite frankly I wouldn't let him go without a fight. He agreed finally to break off the affair with her."

"Did Laura Indris get in touch with you at all during this period?"

The dark-haired woman hesitated for a second and then replied, "Yes, she did. When Gregory told her what had happened, she telephoned and demanded that I free him. She threatened me."

"Just how did she do that?"

"She said she'd kill me to get him."

"Did you report this threat to the police?"

"No. I didn't take it seriously at the time."

"And what happened on the night of January 15th?"

"My husband was called away on business shortly before

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ten o'clock, and I was left alone. A car pulled into the driveway. I couldn't imagine who'd be out on such a bad night, but I went to the door and saw that it was Laura. I think she'd been drinking, but she wasn't really drunk. She forced her way into the house and told me we were going to settle the thing once and for all.

"I suppose we screamed at each other for the better part of a half hour before she picked up a lamp and flung it at me. I was terrified and I ran to Gregory's desk. He had a matched pair of pistols on the desk which he'd cleaned and loaded for some target practise earlier in the evening. That's when Laura suggested the duel, when she saw the twin pistols. I told her she was insane, but she wouldn't listen."

"She forced you to take part in this duel?"

"Yes. She picked up one of the pistols and I had no choice but to take the other and defend myself. She said she'd give me five minutes' start and then come after me. The one who lived would have Gregory all to herself."

There was dead silence in the courtroom as she spoke, and Nick saw the jurors leaning forward, tense with every word.

"Who chose the maze?" the lawyer asked.

"I did. I knew how to reach the center quickly, and I thought I'd be safe there till Gregory returned. Usually it takes someone hours to find their way through the thing. I ran into the maze carrying the pistol. It was easy to find my way because the night had cleared by then and there was a full moon. I was wearing a fur parka to keep warm."

"What time did you enter the maze?"

"Just after eleven, I think. Perhaps about a quarter past. I went directly to the center and waited, feeling sure I'd be safe. After about five minutes I could hear her, outside the maze, calling my name. I think she must have started inside then. For the next half hour I heard her every few minutes, cursing and calling out my name, but she seemed to get no closer. I could hear occasional cars on the road, but I couldn't see them, of course. I only prayed that one of them would be Gregory, but he didn't come in time."

"Finally she found you?"

"She found me. It took her at least a half hour, but she found me. She came into the center of the maze and faced me across a little stone table we have there. She started to raise her arm and I heard a shot. Her bullet missed me, but I had no

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choice. I had to fire back, to save my own life! She must have been turning when the bullet hit her." She buried her face in her hands, sobbing softly. There was a murmur from the spectators and the judge banged his gavel.

Nick rose from his seat and slipped out the door. He would have liked to remain for the cross-examination, but the afternoon was dragging on and he had a few final arrangements to make.

Exactly at five thirty the telephone rang in the motel garage. The uniformed attendant answered the phone and said, "I'm on my way." He locked the door behind him and walked across the enclosed portion of the garage to the parking lot that bordered one side of the motel. He was whistling as he approached the closed white van at one end of the lot and opened the door.

As he slid into the driver's seat Nick hit him from behind and pulled his limp body into the back of the van. Within three minutes Nick had changed clothes with the unconscious man, stretching the pants and shirt and coat as much as he could. The man was thinner than Nick by some thirty pounds, but perhaps they wouldn't notice the tight fit if he stayed behind the wheel.

The driver was propped in the rear of the van and covered with a sack. Then Nick got out and walked around to the back, opened the double doors, and pulled the sack-covered body out. He stuffed him into the back seat of a convenient unlocked car, hoping nobody was watching from the motel windows. Even so, they wouldn't have time to do anything. In five minutes it would be all over.

Nick drove the van out of the parking lot and headed for the courthouse. It was going to be easy. So easy.

They were waiting at the curb for him—13 jurors and the two uniformed court attendants. Nick pulled up and opened the door. The male attendant stuck his head in and asked, "Where's Tommy?"

"Went home sick."

The jurors climbed in awkwardly, with two of the more elderly needing assistance. When they were seated in the van, in two rows facing each other, Nick reached down and turned on the valve in the little tank by his feet. Then he quickly started the motor to cover the hiss of gas. The white van moved slowly forward.

"You're going the wrong way!" the woman attendant said.

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"They got the street torn up. I have to go around the block."

"Street torn up at this time of night?"

"Broken water main. It's all flooded." Nick covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, breathing as best he could from a tiny oxygen inhaler hidden inside it. He hoped the stuff worked quickly.

"What's that noise?" one of the male jurors asked. "Sounds like gas escaping. Maybe your muffler's shot."

"It's okay," Nick mumbled through the handkerchief.

There was a thud from the back as one of the jurors toppled to the floor. "Something's wrong here!" another man shouted. "Something's—"

Nick speeded up and took the next corner with a recklessness that threatened to overturn them. Suddenly the guard was at his throat, trying to yank him from the wheel. "You're not—" The grip relaxed almost at once. After another block Nick turned his head for a quick check. The 15 people in the back of the van were toppled in various positions, all unconscious. He knew the gas would keep them that way for about two hours, which should be long enough.

A few miles farther on, near the city line, Nick pulled into the parking lot of a shopping center. Adam Whipple was waiting for him standing beside his car with an expression of smiling satisfaction. "You did it?" he asked as Nick climbed out of the van.

"One Satin jury, complete with alternate and two court attendants. They're taking a bit of a nap, and should stay like that for about two hours. Where do you want me to take them?"

"Out to Gregory Satin's estate."

Nick whistled softly. "Why there?"

Whipple lit a thin cigar, sheltering the match from the evening breeze. "You said I wanted a mistrial, and you were right. We've probably got one already, but I have to be certain. The judge might decide that the mere kidnaping of the jury for a few hours or even a day didn't contaminate them as far as the case was concerned. But if they're found at Satin's estate, in the company of the defendant's husband, there can be no doubt of a mistrial."

"All right," Nick said. "You're paying the bills." He was prepared for a journey, since he'd known Whipple would want the stolen jury taken somewhere. Quickly he changed the license plate on the van, and then he unrolled two

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adhesive-backed signs for the side panels of the van. In an instant it had become a delivery truck for The Star Florist Shop.

"Clever," Whipple commented, puffing on his cigar.

"I wish I had time to paint it some other color." Although they were in an empty portion of the parking lot, Nick cast an anxious eye toward a supermarket a hundred yards away where a brisk evening trade was developing. "We'd better get going. I'll follow you."

Whipple nodded and climbed into his car. "If we see any police, just leave the truck and run," he advised Nick.

"Don't worry, I'll deliver them. You haven't paid me the rest of my money yet."

The estate of Gregory Satin was only a few miles out of the city, in a low rambling countryside that came into view all at once as Nick reached the top of a hill. He had to admit it was a beautiful place, with horses grazing along a rail fence and a tree-lined driveway curving up to the big English-style manor house. If any home demanded a yew-hedge maze in its gardens, this one did.

Adam Whipple's car pulled up to the front door, and Nick brought the white van to a stop right behind it. As he got out, the front door opened and the tall familiar figure of Gregory Satin appeared.

"Well, Whipple, I never thought you'd have the nerve to show your face around here again! Who's this fellow in the truck?"

"We've brought you something," Whipple said with the tone of a magician about to perform his newest trick. "Come here and look."

Whatever Satin's reaction was to be at finding his wife's jury in that truck, Nick felt he'd rather not witness it. He moved away from the white van, over to the side of the house, anxious to see this strange maze that had been the scene of an equally strange duel.

And there it was—the top of its hedges a foot above Nick's head. The yew bushes had grown together so thickly that walking through them, or even seeing through them, was impossible. And of course he could not see over them. He suspected that other plants, possibly holly, had been intermixed to increase the density.

Nick heard Gregory Satin say, in a loud voice, "Whipple, you must be mad to do a thing like this!" Then Nick entered the maze.

It was a strange twilight world here, where all he could see was the dim June sky above

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him. In every other direction there was only the green of the yew hedges, thick and alive with frustration. In some places the passage was so narrow that the tendrils stung his face.

What had he read somewhere, of a maze in Crete which was supposed to have a minotaur at its center? He wondered what he would find at the center of Gregory Satin's maze, wondered what treasure or terror might await him.

As he rounded the final inner corner of the labyrinth and saw the stone table that marked its center, a figure all in black turned at the sound of his approach. Nick's heart tensed with surprise.

"What are you doing here?" the woman's voice asked. It was the accused murderess, Helen Satin.

"I could ask you the same question," Nick Velvet said. "I saw you in the courtroom only a few hours ago."

She was even more lovely close up, in this strange twilight, than she had been in court. "Do you think they've kept me locked in a cell since January? I've been out on bail, of course. Now who are you, and how did you find the center of the labyrinth?"

"My name is Nick Velvet. I'm a business associate of Adam Whipple."

She snorted at that. "Whipple is a fool. He came to us after the shooting and told Gregory he could get me off. He said that for fifty thousand dollars he'd guarantee my exoneration."

Nick mentally subtracted his own $20,000 fee from that amount and decided that Whipple would turn a good profit if the thing came off. "Did your husband pay him the money?"

"If you're Whipple's business associate you should know that he didn't. In fact, my husband threw him out of the house." She stepped around the stone table for a closer view of him in the failing light. "Now suppose you answer my other question. How did you find the center of the maze so quickly?"

"How do you know I did it quickly?" Nick countered.

"Because I just came in here myself, when I saw the car and the van driving up. I thought it might be a television news crew, and I wanted to get away from them."

"Do you often use the maze to get away from people?"

"You're thinking of that night, aren't you, Mr. Velvet? When I ran away from Laura Indris—"

"I'll admit it was on my mind."

A voice reached them from

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far away. "Velvet!" it called. "Nick Velvet, where are you?"

"You're being paged," she said.

"So I hear. Hope I can find my way out of this place as easily as I got in."

"Come on." She smiled and reached out to take his hand. "I'll show you the way."

"I thought you were hiding."

"What good did it do? You found me."

He followed her out the way he'd come in, past the walls of yew hedge, down the twisting, turning tunnel to the outer world. When they reached it, Nick saw that another car had pulled up behind the white van. He sensed in that instant something had gone wrong, and he turned to seek a way out.

"Hold it, Velvet! Hold it right there!"

He relaxed and kept turning until he faced the gun in the steady hand of Lieutenant Charlie Weston. "Well, fancy meeting you here!"

"Up with your hands, Velvet," the detective said. "Your thieving days are over for good this time."

"How did you find me so quickly?" Nick asked, when they had all moved into the big house. He was aware that his words were almost an echo of the question Helen Satin had asked him at the center of the labyrinth.

Charlie Weston still held the gun, and his eyes were cold and hard. "Do you think I believed you when you told me you just looked in on the Satin trial? I know you, Nick. I know your methods. I almost put you behind bars in the Brazen Letters case, and this time I'm not going to let you slip away. I've been working with the local police and we've had a tail on you these last couple of days. We had an elaborate system for following the white van, using a police helicopter. You didn't have a chance, Nick."

More police had arrived, and they were beginning to revive the people in the van. Two of the women jurors were helped inside to chairs. One of the court attendants, shaking his head to clear it, walked up to Nick. "This is the one—this is the man who was driving the van that picked us up. When I realized something was wrong I tried to grab him but the gas knocked me out too quick."

Weston nodded. "Thank you. We'll be using your testimony."

Gregory Satin and his wife were standing to one side, white-faced and nervous. Satin had already denounced Adam Whipple as the man behind the plot, but it seemed unlikely

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that Satin could completely escape blame. Whipple himself was already handcuffed, and now Weston said, "Hold out your hands, Nick."

The handcuffs clicked into place, and for the first time in his life Nick felt helpless. Kidnaping an entire jury was likely to rate a stiff prison sentence, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

"Tell me one thing," Helen Satin said. "How did you find the center of that maze so quickly?"

"The maze is a duplicate of the one at Hampton Court Palace, which is one of the most famous mazes in the world. I did a little reading about it the last few days. A number of books, including the Encyclopaedia Britannica, give the solution to the labyrinth—go left on entering, then right at the next two forks, then left the rest of the way."

She nodded, watching him with her wide eyes as she had in the center of the maze. Perhaps, he decided, she was something of a minotaur after all—if a minotaur could ever be feminine. Certainly she'd been one for Laura Indris, who had found her at the center of that maze.

"Could I speak to you?" Nick suddenly asked Lieutenant Weston. "Alone?"

The detective frowned and motioned him to one side of the huge living room. More jurors were being brought in now, and the place was becoming crowded. "No tricks now," Weston cautioned. "You're not squirming out of this one."

"I just thought you might be willing to make a deal," Nick said. "You've got your jury back, and nobody's been hurt, not really."

"But the judge will call a mistrial, which is just what you planned. Chances are Helen Satin won't be tried again till fall, because the courts pretty much close down during July and August. And that's just what Whipple wanted when he hired you."

Nick shrugged. "I just thought you'd be more interested in seeing justice done than in sending me to prison."

"Justice will be done."

"You could score big with the local police if you handed them the true story of what happened in that maze."

Weston frowned at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That the killing of Laura Indris couldn't have happened the way Helen Satin says it did."

"You mean because she was shot in the back?"

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"No. I mean because Helen Indris found the center of the maze after searching a half hour."

"You think that was too soon?"

"It was too long."

Weston frowned and cleared his throat. "Damn it, Velvet, what do you want?"

"Just for you to take these cuffs off and let me walk away. It's as simple as that. Promise to do it, and I'll tell you what really happened in that maze on the night of January fifteenth."

Weston cursed and reached out to unlock the handcuffs. "You'd better make it good."

The entire jury had now recovered enough to come into the living room and they stood and sat along two walls. "We'll leave it up to them," Nick said.

He rubbed his freed wrists a bit to restore the circulation, then stepped to the center of the room, standing opposite Satin and his wife and Adam Whipple, with Weston and the other police behind him. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he began. "First, I want to apologize for the manner in which you were brought here. I usually do things a bit more skillfully."

"Get to the point," Weston said behind him.

"I will. Now, folks, I'm sure the judge is going to call a mistrial in this case, but it doesn't seem fair to me that you shouldn't have a chance to decide on an alternate version of the facts—a version I'm going to present to you now. If I convince you of what really happened in that maze last January, Lieutenant Weston here has agreed to let me go."

There were some murmurs of objection from the local police, but Nick hurried on. "Since you've already heard most of the testimony, and since we have the two star witnesses here with us, let's get right to it. Mrs. Satin, if we are to believe your story, it took Laura Indris a full half hour to find the center of the maze that night."

"Some people have taken much longer than that—hours, in fact. She'd never been there before, never seen the maze before—and she'd obviously not read about it in the encyclopaedia, as you did."

Nick smiled at Helen Satin. "It's possible she consulted a reference book."

She shook her head. "You forget that it was I who chose the maze as the site of the duel. She couldn't have prepared herself in advance, because she didn't know I'd run in there."

"All right," Nick granted. "She arrived at the entrance to a maze she'd never seen before,

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with you hiding somewhere inside it with a gun. I repeat my question. Why did it take her a half hour to find you? Because, as two witnesses have testified, it had snowed earlier that evening. Your route through the labyrinth, Mrs. Satin, would have been as sharp and clear as your footprints in the snow under a full moon."

One of the jurors gasped, and every eye in the room turned to Helen Satin. "I—the footprints! I never thought of them. I was so frightened I never even looked down."

"But they were there. Are we to believe your story, that with the footprints to guide her, it still took Laura Indris at least thirty minutes to find you?"

"Why should I lie? Why would I make up such a fantastic story, about the duel and all, if it weren't true?" She was trying to control herself, but the composure she'd shown during the trial was now cracking.

Nick Velvet turned to face the jury, feeling like a prosecuting attorney about to score a telling point. "I don't think you did lie, Mrs. Satin. If you thought up a lie like that, you would certainly have thought up a slight additional lie to cover the bullet wound in the back. You told what you thought was the truth. And yet—Laura Indris still waited a full half hour before following your footprints to the center of the labyrinth. Why?"

"All right, why?" Charlie Weston asked from behind Nick.

"Well, we know that Helen Satin was playing for time, hiding in the maze in the hope her husband would return. If Laura Indris was also waiting, it could only have been for the same thing. She waited a half hour for Gregory Satin to return—to help with the murder of his wife!"

Satin took a step toward Nick, his hands balled into fists, and then thought better of it. "That's crazy," he growled. "I was still at my office."

"I think not. You said you phoned your London office and had to get the manager out of bed, at five in the morning London time. Since there's six hours' difference between here and London, that means you left the office shortly after eleven, not twelve. This is confirmed by the fact that it was still snowing when you started home. We know from both your wife and Detective Reager that the full moon was out and the skies clear by midnight. You started home sometime after eleven, and reached home at just about the

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time Laura Indris started into the maze. You were with her, you had the second gun, and you fired the fatal shot."

"I shot her!" Helen Satin almost screamed. "He wasn't there!"

"The twin guns left out so conveniently, loaded so conveniently. Gregory meant it to happen just as it did. He was sure that, given a choice, you'd run into the maze. Both guns were loaded with blanks—till he arrived home and loaded Laura's weapon with real bullets."

"I saw her with the gun—I tell you I saw her!"

"You saw her raise her arm, that's all—but not *holding* a gun. You heard a shot—fired by your husband. Then you fired an instant later and Laura fell dead. It was a simple matter afterwards for Gregory to switch the two pistols so that it would appear you had fired the fatal one."

"But *why?*"

"Why?" Nick repeated. "I don't know why. Did he aim for you and hit Laura by accident, or did he mean to kill her all along? Did he mean to get rid of you both with this one scheme? Suppose we ask him."

But Gregory Satin had already broken away. He ran out the door before any of the police could stop him. "He's heading for the maze!" Adam Whipple shouted.

Nick turned to the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen, I rest my case."

A few of them broke into applause, and then the others joined in. Charlie Weston walked over. "I'll give you five minutes to get out of here, Nick. Then I put out an alarm for you."

"Thanks."

"You won't thank me the next time, but a deal's a deal."

"What about me?" Whipple asked.

Weston unlocked his handcuffs. "Get out! We can't arrest you without Velvet."

Whipple followed Nick. "Come on. I'll give you a ride back to town."

"You'll give me more than that," Nick reminded him. "The rest of my fee."

"That too."

"What's with you, Whipple?" he asked as they got into the car. "You wanted more than the money."

"She told me she was afraid he'd kill her. I knew he did kill her, and I wanted to delay the trial till I could find some evidence against him. You see, she was my kid sister."

"Helen Satin?"

"No, Laura Indris. Laura Whipple."

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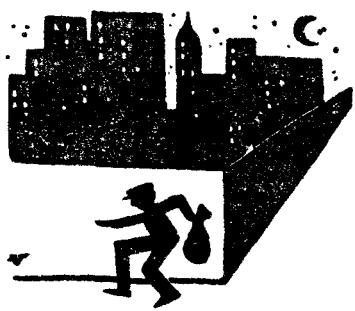
They pulled around the curving driveway, past the yew-hedge maze where the police were moving in now, tracking Gregory Satin to its very center. Nick watched out the window and then said, "Maybe they just won't find him in there. Maybe for people like Gregory Satin there's always a minotaur waiting at the center of the maze."

But the five minutes Lieutenant Weston had given Nick were almost up, so he didn't wait to find out.



CRIMINALIMERICK

SMOOTH AS VELVET

by D. R. BENSEN

If you feel you can pay twenty G's,
Nick Velvet will steal you, with ease,
Any object you choose;
But you'll quite likely lose
Life or limb if you welsh on his fees.

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a NEW story by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Like the bartender said, no one cottons to the idea of dealing with a loan shark, especially if he represents the Organization, and of course Organization money don't come cheap, but if you need dough desperately and can't get it elsewhere, any money's better than no money. So it costs 5% a month interest—that's only 60% a year, and besides, everybody knows that you can't make money without having money . . .

VICIOUS CIRCLE

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

ALL IN ALL, IT WAS A pretty good night for the middle of the week. I was behind the bar as usual, busy and making money, but not really rushed. Best of all there was enough of a crowd in the barroom to cover the number of cars in the parking lot, so that any cop who stuck his nose in wouldn't have any reason to suspect that a high-stakes poker game was going on upstairs. From which the house—me—got its cut, of course.

The Mind was at his usual corner table and by now a fair-sized group had gathered around to try to stump him. And not having any luck, because The Mind had a memory that never let go of anything it ever got hold of—who played second base for the Senators in 1934, big-band theme songs, old movies, anything, you name it. He could even recite word for word the pledge from the old Mr. District Attorney radio show—which, considering who and what The Mind was, was really something.

The smart money didn't try to stump The Mind. Instead they'd bet among themselves and use The Mind to settle it, paying The Mind off with a free drink. But, of course, there was always a sucker around who had to try it. Just as there was always a sucker in the game upstairs who was sure his luck was bound to change if he could just hang in there one more round.

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And that was the reason The Mind hung around my place. Not for the suckers with the questions they were sure he couldn't answer, but for the suckers upstairs in the poker game. The memory thing was just a sideline with him. His real business was loan-sharking for the Organization. And when the sucker upstairs was ripe, The Mind was right there on hand to slip him a couple of hundred or thousand at five percent a month. Of course, there's no such thing as luck and almost before the sucker realized it, he was well on his way to being owned body and soul by the Organization.

A lot of bartenders I know don't like having Organization types like The Mind around. But the way I figured it he was good for business. Besides, the world's divided into those who take and those who are taken. I like to be on the side of the takers.

This particular evening there was only one guy in the place I didn't know by name or by sight—a tall rangy man with fair hair and the kind of open fleshy face that seems to go with work in the outdoors. He was sitting down toward one end of the bar and listening to the group around The Mind without really being a part of it. He didn't look like a cop, but it never paid to take chances. So the first opportunity I got I moved down the bar to where he was sitting and stuck out my hand.

"Hi," I said, giving him the hearty-host treatment. "I'm the Johnny they call this place 'Johnny's' after. I don't think I've seen you around before."

The guy jumped as if startled, then smiled sheepishly and grasped my hand across the bar. "Earl Sanders," he said. "And you're right. This is my first time here."

"Well," I said, smiling more naturally now, because he didn't sound like a cop, "don't let it be your last. I can use all the business I can get."

Just then one of my regulars—a jerk named Evans—sitting about two stools down decided to butt in. He put one elbow on the bar and leaned toward us. "That's a laugh," he said. The liquor hadn't hit his tongue yet, but his eyes glittered and his face was shiny from one drink too many. "Ever since they opened that government office building across the way, this place has been a gold mine. And Johnny's got a fat five-figure bank balance to prove it." He grinned foolishly and let his elbow slide closer to us. "I ought to know. I'm his banker."

I gave him a cold look. "Keep talking like that," I said

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quietly, "and you won't be much longer."

That sobered him up in a hurry, because Evans was just a teller in the neighborhood bank and it wouldn't do him any good at all if I dropped the word to his bosses that he was spending his evenings drinking and blabbing bank business.

Sanders seemed to have missed the by-play between me and Evans, though. Or the last part of it anyway. He was staring morosely at his glass. "That's the way it goes," he said in the half-wistful, half-bitter voice of a born loser. "Some guys get the breaks and make out and others don't. It's the same in my business."

"What kind of a business is that, Mr. Sanders?" I said more to change the subject than from any real curiosity.

"Construction work," Sanders said.

Instinctively my eyes dropped to his hands. They were smooth and soft. Sanders followed my gaze and gave me that same sheepish grin.

"I don't mean I do it myself," he said. "I'd probably be better off if I did, the kind of wages I have to pay." He rolled his glass between his hands and his grin became rueful. "I have my own company. Sanders Construction. Page 397 in your Yellow Pages." He said it with such defensive pride that I was sure the listing was a single line or at best an eighth-of-a-page ad. In any case, I figured I had nothing to worry about from Sanders. So I stood him a drink on the house and let him go back to listening to The Mind.

Sanders got to be a pretty steady customer after that, dropping in maybe three or four times a week. Occasionally he'd drop by in the evening but more often he'd come in early, before the five-o'clock after-work crowd hit, and have a couple of beers and shoot the breeze with me. I figured that if this was the way he ran his business it was no wonder he wasn't making any money. But that was his problem, not mine.

Anyway, about a month or so later, Sanders dropped in at his usual time and ordered his usual beer. But this time instead of chatting he sat quietly at the end of the bar, flipping through the pages of a magazine he'd brought with him. If he didn't want to talk, I wasn't going to push him, so I kept myself busy polishing glasses.

Finally Sanders sighed and pushed the magazine to one side. "You know, Johnny," he said. "I sometimes wonder why I bother to subscribe to this thing. All I do is torture myself with it."

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I put down my towel now that he was showing an inclination to talk and moved closer to him. "How's that, Mr. Sanders?" I said.

Sanders turned the magazine around so I could see it. "It's a trade magazine for engineers and contractors," he said. "It lists invitations to bid on construction jobs. Not little piddling jobs, either," he added, "but the kind you always dream about. The kind that'll put you up there with the big-money boys."

He turned the magazine halfway around to where we both could read it and began to leaf through it rapidly. Once he almost knocked over his beer, but he caught the glass in time and moved it out of the way.

"See that?" he said, finding what he wanted in the magazine and pointing with his finger. "That's an invitation to subcontract on a job putting in a city subway system out West." His voice grew in enthusiasm as he went on. "Now that's a job that's right up my alley! I could cut it real close on the bid to be sure of coming in low and still make a tidy profit."

I looked down at the page without really trying to read it. "Why don't you bid on it then?" I said.

Sanders laughed shortly. "Because they freeze the little man out," he said. "To get a bid even considered, you've got to prove you have the right equipment to do the job." His voice took on that loser's quality again. "And, of course, I don't have the right equipment. Or the money to buy it with. It just goes to show—like they say, you've got to have money to make money."

I watched him impassively, thinking how he sounded just like the suckers in the poker game. This was a different game, but the players were divided the same way—winners and losers, takers and taken. And if anybody was ripe to be taken, it was Sanders, I thought. Somebody could pick up a nice small construction company dirt cheap. It was kind of a pity that it would be the Organization and not me. Still, there would be a nice commission for me for making the referral, and the Organization took care of its friends in other ways, too. So I wouldn't lose by it in the long run.

"That's a shame," I said. "Maybe you could get a loan, though, to cover the down payment on new equipment."

Sanders snorted derisively. "A loan!" he said. "A lot you know about banks then. They won't give me a loan on a job like this unless I've already got the contract. And I can't get

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the contract unless they give me a loan. It's a vicious circle."

"I wasn't thinking about a bank," I said. "I was thinking about The Mind. He's got money to lend. It's Organization money and it don't come cheap. But it would get you your equipment."

Sanders bit on his knuckle. "I see," he said. He brooded on it a while, then said slowly, "I'd need at least $50,000. Would The Mind be able to swing that much?"

It sounded a bit steep, but let The Mind worry about whether Sanders was worth it or not. "He could get it," I said. When Sanders still looked undecided I added, "I know you don't cotton to the idea of dealing with a loan shark. But look at it this way—you'll only need the money until you get your contract. Then you can get a regular loan from the bank, pay The Mind off, and be on your way."

"That's right," Sanders said, catching fire. "And I could pay the bank off out of my profits from the job." He slapped the bar with his hand and said with sudden decisiveness, "Where can I find The Mind?"

I shrugged. "I don't know where he lives," I said. "But he'll be in here later tonight. All you have to do is stop by his table and tell him you want to talk business. He'll do the rest. And—uh—don't forget to mention that I sent you over."

"I sure won't," Sanders said, standing up and tossing a five-dollar bill down on the bar. "I don't think you realize how big a favor you've done me, Johnny," he said. "But thanks to you I'll end up a millionaire yet."

And you, I thought as I watched his departing back, don't realize how big a favor you're doing me. Neither did I at the time.

The Mind came in around 9:30 that evening as usual and stopped by the bar to pick up his first drink. Generally it was the only one he paid for himself.

"Slow evening," he said, looking around while I mixed the drink for him. He was a poker-faced little guy with a nose too large for his face and thick glasses too large for the nose. He kept his voice mild and as empty of expression as his face. Only his eyes behind the big glasses seemed alive. They moved restlessly and you were always glad when they passed away from you.

"It'll pick up now that you're here, Mind," I said, grinning and handing him his glass. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him about

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Sanders, but I decided not to in case Sanders had had second thoughts about getting mixed up with the Organization.

"Hope so," The Mind said. He slid a bill across at me, waved away the change, and strolled over to his corner table.

And just as I'd predicted, things did start to pick up. He'd no sooner gotten settled when two guys went over to ask him to decide a bar bet. I didn't hear his answer, but a minute later one of the guys was heading for the bar to order the pay-off round plus one for The Mind.

It looked like it was going to be a good evening after all.

It looked even better a half hour or forty-five minutes later when Sanders came in and beelined to the bar.

"Is The Mind here yet, Johnny?" he said in a hushed, anxious voice as I came up to him.

"Right over there," I said, nodding.

Sanders looked around in the direction of my nod. As anxious as he sounded, I figured he'd head straight over. But instead he ordered a Scotch and water and took his time drinking it. Getting up his nerve, I decided, because every time I had a free minute he'd call me over to talk about nothing in particular.

Finally, though, he tossed off the last of his Scotch and stood up. "Wish me luck," he said.

I gave him the "O" sign with my thumb and forefinger and watched him walk over to The Mind's table and speak to him. A moment later he pulled a chair around and sat down.

I got kind of busy after that and lost track of them until Sanders came back to the bar. The way he looked I was afraid the loan hadn't gone through and I'd lost my commission. So first chance I got I went over to him.

"How'd it go?" I said, casual and friendly-like.

A funny little smile twisted Sanders' mouth. "All right, I guess," he said. "I got the loan, but it's costing me more than I expected. Five percent a month interest."

"Well," I said, relieved, "you knew it wouldn't be cheap."

Sanders nodded. "You're right," he said. "So I guess I can't complain." He put his hand in his pocket. "Oh," he said, "by the way, The Mind said to give you this." He pulled out a roll of bills and handed it to me.

I thumbed through it rapidly before sticking it in my own pocket. Fifty bucks. That was five times what The Mind usually paid for a referral. But

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then I'd never referred this big a loan to him before. And in any case who was I to argue with $50?

I caught The Mind's eye, patted my pocket, and nodded my appreciation. The Mind made a slight gesture with his hand to say it was nothing. That was the kind of a guy he was—as long as you were on the right side of him, that is.

I didn't see Sanders around for about five or six weeks after that. It was nothing to me, of course, and when I thought about it at all I figured he was out West arranging the details of his contract bid.

Then one afternoon he walked in out of the blue. It was early again and the place was empty. Only this time Sanders looked like this wasn't the first place he'd hit. His tie was loose at the collar and his face was flushed.

"Whiskey, Johnny," he said, sliding onto one of the bar stools. "And keep it coming until I tell you to stop. Only I won't tell you to stop." He didn't look or sound like he was celebrating. On the other hand there's no law that says you can only serve happy people.

I poured him a shot. "What happened, Mr. Sanders?" I said. "Your contract fall through?" It was the only thing I could think of that would set him off like this. And, of course, it was what I'd expected to happen all along, anyway.

Sanders laughed bitterly. "You know, Johnny," he said, "I almost think I'd feel better if it had." He picked up his glass, drained it, and put it back down so hard that it rang against the bar. "No," he said, "everything worked out just as I planned it. I was low bidder and the job's mine. But those damn lawyers won't sign until all the other subcontracts are buttoned up. And that won't be for another two months."

"So what's your problem?" I said. "You just wait out the two months and then you're in clover."

Sanders shook his head. "That's the problem, Johnny," he said. "I can't wait out the two months. I've got a payment coming due to The Mind tomorrow and my credit is stretched so tight I can't raise a dime."

"That is tough," I said. "The Mind doesn't like people missing payments."

Sanders laughed even more bitterly than before. "You think so?" he said. "There's nothing The Mind would like *more* than for me to miss a payment. Then he and the Organization can take over my company and a job that practically guarantees a profit

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of a million bucks. And if I try to stop him I'll end up dead in an alley somewhere."

I caught my upper lip between my teeth and chewed on it softly. "A million bucks," I murmured.

"At least," Sanders said. "And it would be mine except for a measly five-thousand-dollar payment I can't make and can't raise."

I looked at Sanders for a long minute and made my decision. It was dangerous crossing The Mind, but he didn't have to know. And the profit made the risk worth it. "I've got $5000," I said.

Sanders looked up suddenly and relief flooded his face. "Look, Johnny," he said, his hands making little shaking motions, "you lend me that money and I'll guarantee you'll have it back in two months at the latest with a profit of ten—no, twenty percent." He smiled tentatively. "So, how about it? Is it a deal?"

I smiled tightly and shook my head. "I wasn't thinking of a loan," I said. "What I had in mind was an investment. Like, say, a half interest in your million-dollar profit."

Sanders looked at me aghast. "You can't be serious," he said.

"Why not?" I said. "The way I look at it I'm doing you an even bigger favor than before. Because without my $5000 you've got nothing except a load of trouble. With it you get to keep your company and make half a million bucks for yourself."

I had him over a barrel, of course, but I didn't want to be unreasonable. Because a happy sucker is better than an unhappy one any day and it wouldn't be long before I'd squeezed him out altogether anyway. So in the end we settled on a one-fourth interest for $10,000.

I hung a closed sign on the door and took Sanders over to the bank to get the money out before he could change his mind.

"You're a good businessman, Johnny," Sanders said as we counted the last of the money into his attaché case.

"I try to be," I said. I patted the pocket holding the partnership agreement, all legal and binding, that I'd written out and made him sign. "No hard feelings, I hope?"

"No," Sanders said, "of course not. Business is business and that's all there is to it." He closed the case and tucked it under his arm. "Well," he said, "I guess we both have things to do and people to see." He crossed to the door. "I'll be in touch. And if you see The Mind before I do, be sure to tell him

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I'll meet him at his usual table tomorrow to make the payment."

"Sure," I said, thinking about what I was going to do with all that money.

That evening The Mind stopped in as usual and when I handed him his glass I said casually, as if I'd just remembered it, "By the way, I saw Sanders today. He said to tell you he'd meet you at your usual table tomorrow with the money."

"Sanders?" The Mind said. "Who's Sanders?"

"That big blond guy," I said. "He borrowed $50,000 from you as a down payment to buy new equipment for a construction job out West."

The Mind shook his head. "Not from me he didn't," he said.

"About five or six weeks ago," I said, the bottom of my stomach falling out. "He went over to your table to make the loan and afterwards you sent him back with $50 for me for making the referral."

The Mind let his eyes rest on me. Then he said, "Yeah, I remember the guy. But he didn't make any loan. He said he had a bet with you over who was the first to break the four-minute mile. I said it was Roger Bannister and he said in that case he owed you $50. That's all. Why he'd want to tell you he'd made a loan I sure don't know."

I had a pretty good idea but just to make sure, the next morning I looked up the Sanders Construction Company in the Yellow Pages. It was there on page 397 all right, but when I phoned at nine on the dot and asked to speak to Mr. Earl Sanders the girl who answered told me that there hadn't been a Mr. Sanders in the company since the present owner's father-in-law died in 1953.

So, really, what can you believe in any more? Especially these days . . .

"O"

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The Blue and Gray Club had only seven members, but collectively they were virtual experts on all the historical aspects of the American Civil War. One member specialized in Lincoln, another in Grant, others in the Confederate government, military logistics, naval warfare, general staffs and chains of command, uniforms and weapons, and in the legal, political, and ideological issues underlying that cruel conflict . . . altogether a most unusual background for a most unusual "dying message" . . .

THE BLUE AND GRAY CLUB

by ROBERT S. ALDRICH

LEFT TO HIMSELF, JAY Heath would never have thought of attending a meeting of The Blue and Gray Club. The little group of American Civil War enthusiasts met every Friday evening in one of the back-office rooms of McConnell, Burke and Shaplen, attorneys.

While involved with matters having to do with settling the estate of his spinster aunt, Martha Stoneberry, who a month ago had taken a sudden fatal fall down a staircase, Jay had made the acquaintance of her elderly lawyer, A. Harvey Burke. And because he had offered one or two fairly intelligent comments about a pair of officer's dress sabers that hung crossed on the wall above Burke's desk, together with a faded, once blue, now gray, Union Cavalry guidon bearing the insignia of a bird in flight, he had been trapped into a long discussion of their history. It seemed these articles had belonged to Burke's great-grandfather, who rode with Colonel B. F. Grierson's Illinois and Iowa troopers in Mississippi and Tennessee.

Mainly to keep in the lawyer's good graces, Jay agreed to be his guest at the next Blue and Gray meeting.

The boardroom, with two tall windows at one side, had a long conference table in the center. The walls were hung with battle maps, portraits of Civil War leaders, and romanticized paintings of men in

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combat. On a separate lower table, much like the sandtables found in nurseries, toy soldiers, miniature cannon and horses and similar paraphernalia were arranged in battle formation. Tiny boats sailed a river of glass and tiny soldiers and horse-drawn wagons crossed on Lilliputian pontoon bridges. A bit childish, thought Jay, reflecting on the contrast between the toy stuff and the aging club members.

There were six of them around the long table, besides A. Harvey Burke and Jay, who at 33 felt rather like a youngster on his first day in kindergarten.

"Now, I'll tell you about these fellows, Heath," said Burke, his eyes twinkling good-humoredly. "Though it shouldn't take you long to find out for yourself. McPherson here"—Burke nodded toward a fat pink-faced man—"is as staunch a Grant defender as ever you'll find. Dare you say a word against the proud name of Ulysses Simpson and he'll chase you all the way to Richmond!"

Jay, grinning, noticed that McPherson's cheeks grew pinker still as quiet chuckles ran around the table.

Gradually Jay sorted them out. Professor Fredericks, a thin scholarly-looking teacher with serious brown eyes behind pince-nez, had made the Confederate government his special field of interest.

Phipps, a stern-jawed man with a shiny pate—introducing himself, he had offered Jay a lemon drop—was an engineer; by no mere coincidence he had made himself an authority on railroads, bridges, and such military mechanics.

Cogswell, the heavily bearded commercial photographer, was identified as a collector of Lincolniana; he owned many prized pieces of memorabilia concerning Honest Abe.

Dr. Harper, a retired physician, had made naval warfare his stock-in-trade, so to speak, and could tell you all about the landings at Port Royal, the New Orleans campaign, and the Monitor and the Merrimac.

"We're a bit like the blind men and the elephant," said Burke, "all tending to look at the great War from a slightly different angle, but all agreeing that it was the big divide of our nation's history, the most fascinating and at the same time—" He broke off. "Oh, of course, Fitch! I nearly neglected Fitch, one of our most valued members."

Jay could see that it would be easy to overlook Fitch, a small modest-appearing man whose shy, tight-lipped smile came with an effort.

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"Fitch is particularly knowledgeable on general staffs, chains of command, and the like on both sides, but I would say that his truest enthusiasms are for Jeb Stuart's Cavalry and General Robert E. Lee himself. Right, Fitch?"

The little man nodded and the corners of his lips turned up.

"The chairman neglected to mention his own particular specialty," said Professor Fredericks drily.

"I don't know that I have one," Burke said as he leaned back, twiddling his thumbs. "I like to think I take the broad over-all view."

"Being a lawyer he's reluctant to commit himself," said Fredericks, "but as one who has lost a good many arguments to him, I'd say he's a fount of wisdom on the legal issues underlying the War. He can trip us up when we're wrong, as we frequently are, on the political and social issues. If that makes him sound a bit dull, be assured he's keen, too, on uniforms and weapons." Fredericks turned to Jay. "What particular aspect of the Civil War interests you, Mr. Heath?"

"Well," Jay stammered, "I'm afraid I really don't know that much about it." He had seen "Gone with the Wind" three times but he didn't suppose that counted.

The admission evoked a smile from the professor. "We all began knowing little and, in fact, the more we learn, the more we realize how little we do know. The Civil War has its element of mystery, like a curtain never fully drawn."

"True," said Burke, "probably because its events are so entangled with human nature which is always somewhat mysterious."

"I never thought about it that way," Jay said. "I guess I always thought it was all written down, there in the history books."

"Much of it is, of course," said the professor. "But history is a web of impressions, seen and felt by many men in many different ways. In the end there are always puzzles left unsolved, the most interesting having to do with men's motives. What paralyzed McClellan's will to attack, for instance? Or Halleck's? Confound it, Phipps!"

This last remark was provoked by the engineer who had broken open a fresh package of lemon drops and spilled them over the tabletop. A few rattled on the floor.

"Sorry!" Phipps flushed as he scooped up the yellow candies.

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Burke shook his head. "Phipps and his lemon drops! Reminds me of Stonewall Jackson."

Jay must have looked quizzical. Burke explained: "General Jackson liked to suck on lemons, and frequently did, even while moving into battle. He kept a quantity of the fruit in a supply wagon."

"I've always thought it a marvelously characteristic touch," Fredericks commented with a smile. "Somehow you can't picture Stonewall munching on chocolate bonbons, can you?"

"It was practically his only weakness," said Fitch, clearing his throat timorously, "that is, if you can call it that."

"A Bible in one hand, a lemon in the other—that's my picture of Jackson," Dr. Harper murmured. "Though no doubt inaccurate, not leaving him a saber hand free."

For most of that evening Jay felt himself an innocent and ignorant bystander. He listened half-interestedly, trying to keep up with a long discussion about Joe Hooker's attempts to stop Lee's forward push at Chancellorsville. He soon lost the thread of the argument, which, though friendly enough, grew occasionally heated and emotional. Privately, he wondered how these graybeards could get so worked up over a war that had been over more than a century. Rushing to wall maps, voices rising, splitting fine hairs over misinterpreted orders and late-arriving reinforcements, they spoke as if the War were a still-living occurrence, its outcome still in doubt. Copies of Catton's popular histories or Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants* were hurriedly snatched from shelves and consulted.

"A pontoon bridge over the lower Rappahannock in spring flood? Nonsense! You'll swamp your horses, drown your troops, and mire your wagons!"

"That so? I suppose Lee didn't know what he was doing when he pulled Jackson out of Fredericksburg and sent him into Hooker's flank. And besides—"

Oh, for Appomattox Courthouse and peace, thought weary Jay. He would have been much more interested in hearing from lawyer Burke that Aunt Martha's will had at last been settled. The legal matters seemed to be taking longer than the Civil War had lasted.

When at last the meeting adjourned, Jay agreed to come again next week, only with the hope that keeping in close contact with the attorney might help push him into faster action in getting the will through probate.

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He had been taken by surprise—a very pleasant surprise—the day Burke informed him that Aunt Martha's will named him principal beneficiary, which meant that he would receive most of the comfortable estate consisting of reliable stocks and some excellently located real estate. Never married, Martha Stoneberry had inherited a sizable fortune from an older brother, Jay's Uncle Eric. Extremely thrifty, Aunt Martha had been generous to her favorite causes, largely those having to do with conservation and wildlife. She had an aviary in her back yard and was president of both the Deer and Antelope Protective Association and the Friends of the Curlew. It was in connection with funds raised to benefit the latter group that a regrettable incident had occurred.

Aunt Martha had kept the cash from the benefit in a locked drawer of her sitting-room desk. Jay had meant only to borrow some of it, but an unforeseen development—specifically, a horse that had failed to run as fast as inside information had promised—had caused him embarrassment. He could still recall with a shudder the wrath which Aunt Martha had exhibited when he attempted to explain. Evidently time had soothed her ire and sometime before her tragic fall she had decided to forgive him. After all, he was her nearest living relative . . .

Twice during the week Jay called at Burke's office. On the first visit the lawyer said only that there was nothing new and reminded Jay that these things took time. His manner struck Jay as slightly evasive, and when on his second call he found Burke out of his office and his secretary busy down the hall, he hurriedly went through the papers in the desk. He was impelled by curiosity; his aunt might have written something before her death, possibly damaging to his reputation. He found one or two interesting documents but no outright criticism of his character.

That Friday evening he was sauntering toward Burke's office when Dr. Harper, Professor Fredericks, and Fitch got out of a car and hailed him jovially. Together they took the elevator. Within minutes they were joined by Phipps, Cogswell, and McPherson.

"That's odd," said Fitch.

He was pointing to the wall above Burke's desk. There was only one of the pair of Cavalry sabers hanging there. The guidon flag, on its staff, was also missing. "Where is Burke, by the way?"

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Burke was waiting for them in the meeting room—but in a way so shocking that Jay averted his eyes. The lawyer lay sprawled on his back across the width of the table. Glassy in death, his sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling.

Upright, plunged deep into his chest, was the Cavalry saber.

Uttering exclamations of horror, the seven gathered around. Sudden silence fell as Dr. Harper swiftly examined the body.

"Dead only a short while," the physician announced. "Perhaps an hour, or less."

"Someone had better call the police." They all heard Fredericks but for a few moments no one could break the paralysis that the shock or murder had induced.

"Who—and why?" Cogswell voiced the questions.

"Someone"—McPherson's eyes shifted nervously from one to the other—"someone who knew we would be meeting here tonight?"

"Are you suggesting," blurted Phipps, "that one of us—?"

"Look here." Dr. Harper had shifted the position of Burke's body slightly. No one had noticed the book lying under the crook of the right arm. McPherson picked it up. "A copy of *Grant's Memoirs*," he said.

"There's something in that pocket," said Fitch.

Carefully Fredericks drew out the aged crumpled paper. "A Confederate bond in the amount of five thousand. No intrinsic value, of course, but worth something in the collectors' market."

"Wait, something else here in the left hand." Dr. Harper pried open the dead fist. Two hard yellow shapes clattered on the table top. Lemon drops. "They must have been on the floor," Phipps muttered self-consciously.

From an inside pocket of Burke's coat McPherson's fingers pulled an unframed picture, four by five inches—a photocopy of a famous daguerreotype of Lincoln. "Why, that's mine!" Cogswell exclaimed.

"Gentlemen," Fredericks said, "do you know what is occurring to my mind? A kind of pattern. Who in this club do we identify with General Grant? McPherson. With Lincoln, Cogswell. Phipps and his infernal lemon drops we associate with Stonewall Jackson. I, myself, may have some useful knowledge of the Confederate government that issued that bond."

McPherson and Cogswell both looked perturbed. "You mean these are clues of some

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sort?" said Fitch. "But what kind of madman would—" He paused. "Are you trying to say that whoever killed him deliberately planted these things?"

From Burke's coat pocket Fredericks drew a tiny model of a naval gunboat, of the kind found on the sandtable. "That would be the clue to me, wouldn't it?" said Dr. Harper. "That leaves—let's see—Fitch. But there's nothing to remind us of Fitch, is there?"

"Oh, no?" Cogswell grunted as he stooped over. "This must have fallen on the floor." He handed the forage cap to Fitch who examined its inside lining. "Why, it's mine," he said. "Worn by one of Jeb Stuart's troopers."

"I'll phone the police," Jay said, and left the room. When he returned McPherson was saying, "But supposing one of us is a murderer, which I can't believe, what sense is there in leaving these clues?"

"I don't believe," Professor Fredericks said, "that the murderer left them." He had their attention now. "Reconstruct the scene. Burke is here in this room, probably reading. Unexpectedly his visitor enters the front office, takes one of the sabers from over the desk. He comes in here, there is a struggle—"

"Just a moment," said Jay. "Maybe the killer was already in here waiting for Burke."

"No," Fredericks said. "Not likely. Burke would have noticed if that saber was gone when he came in."

"Right," said Cogswell. "For him it would be like a missing tooth."

Fredericks went on, "Burke is attacked, the saber driven into his chest. The killer knows the rest of us are coming, so he doesn't hang around. He flees, thinking Burke already dead.

"But Burke must have lived for a few more agonizing minutes, too weak to remove the saber but able to collect these things. Knowing death is very near, what would be his thought? To name his murderer!"

"Your theory cracks up against common sense," Phipps interjected. "Why wouldn't he simply take a pen or pencil and write out the name?"

It was Dr. Harper who answered, by lifting Burke's bloodied right hand. The fingers had been slashed by the saber's cutting edge.

"Okay, he couldn't write, not with that hand. But why *all* these clues? Why not just one?"

"What was Burke's specialty in this club?" asked Fredericks.

"He liked to say he had none," Fitch replied cautiously. "The broad over-all view. But

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the law, I'd say that was really it."

"Exactly. The legal and political bases of the War's ideologies. And like Dan'l Webster, like Abe Lincoln, he would want to preserve the Union—even, in this case, the union of our little club. Gentlemen, I admit I am in the area of the speculative, the unprovable, but knowing our friend these many years, I think he gathered these things to *clear* us. To each, he was leaving a clue saying, 'You were not responsible.' "

"Then who—?"

"Knowing our respect for the facts of history, would Burke not trust us to draw the obvious conclusion—that the person whose sign was *not* included was the responsible party?"

They all turned to stare at Jay.

"Don't be absurd," Jay said, backing up a step. "What sign would there be for me, anyway? I'm not a specialist in anything!"

"Perhaps Burke's very point," said Dr. Harper.

Fredericks nudged Cogswell. "Go and get the Cavalry guidon."

"But it's not there."

"Not over Burke's desk, no. There!" Fredericks pointed to the tall windows. "I noticed it a few minutes ago and was waiting to see if anyone else would."

Coming from Burke's office, McPherson cried, "The other saber—now it's gone, too!"

Clutching the keen-edged weapon tightly by the handle, Jay swung at the nearest gray head. What business of these arthritic old buzzards that his meticulous and disapproving aunt had scribbled a new will, only a day before her death, leaving everything to the Deer and Antelope Protective Association and the Friends of the Curlew? By sheer chance he had come across the duly executed codicil in the lawyer's desk, a codicil removing her nephew as heir.

The fact that Burke hadn't mentioned the changed will supported Jay's suspicion that only in the last day or so had the lawyer come across the codicil in the jackdaw collection in Aunt Martha's study. Burke had to be killed before he could bring it to the attention of the court, and before, as his notes indicated, he might reopen the investigation into Martha Stoneberry's not altogether accidental tumble down her staircase.

But suddenly Jay was tripping, falling headlong over the guidon staff thrust at him by Cogswell, while—quite athlet-

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ically, considering their compounded ages—the members of The Blue and Gray Club threw themselves on him, pinning him to the floor.

"Good work," puffed Professor Fredericks, when it was over. There was the final clue, sticking out the window like Barbara Frietchie's flag.

With a hand that trembled ever so slightly, Professor Fredericks offered the old guidon's faded insignia—the figure of a jay, a bluejay, as it happened—a gallantly respectful salute. Then turning sadly toward the corpse of his fallen comrade, he delivered, slightly amended, the last words of the immortal Stonewall Jackson:

"Let him cross the river and rest, there in the shade of the trees."

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Introducing an author new to the pages of EQMM—R. A. Lafferty. At the time of this writing Mr. Lafferty is on the rise: he has two books on Doubleday's list of forthcoming publications, two more on Scribner's, and has just signed a four-book contract with Walker & Company.

Mr. Lafferty's first story in EQMM is an odd one—odd and offbeat. (Have we found another "sui generis" writer?) . . . And now meet a cast of characters including Carnadine, Mossback, Eustace, Silas, Carlos, Finnbar, Giddy, Annalee, Tyburn, Tootsy, Hatchel, to say nothing of The Bengal Tigers (Unaffiliated), as precocious an aggregation of children as you've ever had the pleasure of meeting in print . . .

"ENFANTS TERRIBLES"

by R. A. LAFFERTY

"MR McCARTY, DO YOU know a good way to get blood off a knife?" asked Carnadine.

"That's an odd question from a nine-year-old girl," said Mossback McCarty, the old cop.

"Going on ten," said Carnadine.

"I would first have to see the knife."

"It was a hypopetical question, you know, that kind. Besides, Eustace has the knife, not me."

"Get Eustace and the knife here at once."

"I don't know where he is."

"Send one of your minions to find Eustace, and the knife."

"I don't know what a minion is."

"Fatty Frost there is a minion of yours."

So they sent Fatty on the mission.

This was almost the only place on his beat where Mossback could sit down and rest, this vacant lot with the little ravine behind it. And on the lot was the clubhouse of The Bengal Tigers with the bench out in front. Mossback was too broad and too tall to enter the clubhouse itself, but he sat every day on the bench and rested.

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"You do give us a bad name, though," Carnadine Thompson told him. "All the other clubs despise us because a cop visits here. You know, we're cop killers by our constitution."

"I didn't know The Bengal Tigers had a constitution, Carnadine. Is it a real written one?"

"Well, not exactly a written one. But it's a real one with nineteen bylaws I think they call them. It has been transmitted orally from father to son and from mother to daughter since the club was founded."

"And how long ago was the club founded?"

"Two weeks tomorrow."

Fatty Frost brought Eustace, but without the knife.

"I understand you have a knife with blood on it, Eustace," said Mossback.

"It belongs to me. I won't tell you where it is. Cops steal things from people. They call it impounding the evidence."

"Papa says all cops are crooked," contributed Carnadine. "I said, 'All but Mossback.' He said, 'That's right. He's not crooked, he's just dumb.' "

"Your father is not himself an unqualified genius, Carnadine. Now then, Eustace, small boys should not have bloody knives. Where is it and where did you get it?"

"I got it out of a man."

"You should say, 'I got it from a man.' Did he give it to you?"

"Not exactly. But he didn't say I couldn't have it."

"Did he say you could have it?"

"No. He didn't say anything. I asked him but he wouldn't answer. I couldn't get him to wake up."

Mossback began to feel funny.

"Eustace, you will show me the knife and you will show me where you got it or I will paddle your pog. I will not be flimflammed by an eight-year-old boy."

"Going on nine," said Eustace. "I'm going to put the knife back where I got it. And then I'm going to wash my hands of it. With the reputation I got I can't afford to get involved with the law."

Then he ran off.

Mossback followed the children heavily. He saw Eustace go up and down a tree like a cat. He had had the knife hidden in a crotch of the tree. Then the boy ran down into the ravine with the knife in his hand. But when Mossback came up to the scene he froze with horror and his hair bristled.

For a shabby dead man lay there, and a knife was prominent in the middle of his chest.

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And little Eustace had just risen from the dead man.

"Eustace, what have you done?" Mossback whispered.

"Oh, I put it back where I found it like I said I would."

"And where are you going, what are you going to do now?"

"Why, I'm going to wash my hands of it just like I said."

Mossback noticed for the first time that it was caked black blood and not dirt on Eustace's hands. And he realized, not for the first time, that the words of children should always be taken literally.

"You may be the stupidest patrolman on the force, Mossback," said Captain Keil. "It's incredible that you should allow a man to be stabbed on your beat, and then allow a small boy to pull a knife from the body, run away with it, hide it in a tree, and finally return and plunge it back into the body again. Do you know who the dead man is?"

"No."

"Do you know who lives in all five of the houses that back onto the ravine?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Who?"

"In the first house, a man whom I have never seen except distantly—he only bought the house a week ago and moved in yesterday—a Silas Schermerhorn who is an ex-magistrate of some sort, and retired. In the second house is Tyburn Thompson, the father of Eustace and Carnadine here, and a terrible-tempered man in his own right. In the third is Carlos Rey who runs a tobacco store downtown and is a Cuban. In the fourth is Fred Frost, the father of Fatty here—"

"The boy has a given name, I'm sure."

"Finnbar."

"Very well, the father of Fatty here—"

"—who is a competent machinist and an incompetent inventor. What he makes at the one trade, he loses at the other. And in the fifth house is Hatchel Horn, an engraver."

"Get them all here right now, men, wives, children, and domestics; and let nobody else near. We will talk to them right here. It is a shady nook here by the dollhouse."

"It is no more a dollhouse than you are," said Carnadine with some resentment. "It is the clubhouse of The Bengal Tigers, a fraternal organization, and that other word where they have girls, too."

"What, child?"

"Sororical, I think."

"Oh."

They began to arrive.

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"I am Silas Schermerhorn," said a gray and polished man, "former judge, though not of this state. I understand there has been an accident."

"And this lady is your wife?"

"Hellpepper no, that's mama," howled Eustace.

"I could do worse," said the lady. "In fact, I probably have. He seems quite a nice gentleman and should add tone to the neighborhood. But I'm Giddy Thompson."

"Giddy doesn't seem like a proper name."

"It's apt, though it may not be proper. My name is Geraldine Isabella Dorothy Dorta Yseult, I being named after five aunts. You can see how this would be shortened to Giddy."

"Yes, I can see how."

"Mrs. Schermerhorn has been dead for many years," said the gray polished man.

"This is Rose Rey coming in the bathrobe," said Giddy.

"Hi, honey," said Rose. "It seems like a lot of fuss to make just because I ran into a parked car. Why do you have to gather all the neighbors to tell them about it? How did you find out it was me?"

"I don't think it's about that, Rose," said Giddy. "This, Captain, is Annalee Frost, and this is her husband, Fred. My, you look frowsy in the morning, Fred. This is Tootsy Horn. Her real name isn't Tootsy. I was the one who started to call her that—I think it's cute, don't you? And all these children belong to some one or the other of us. Is it necessary to sort them out?"

"Perhaps not at present. Aren't there three men to be accounted for, Mossback? Where are they?"

"At work. They'll be here soon."

"And the domestics? Where are the domestics?"

"You kidding, honey?" asked Rose.

"All of you children go into the dollhouse, and stay there for the present," said Captain Keil. "I don't want you running around."

"I explained once that it was a clubhouse," said Carnadine, her jaw grim, "and besides, Peewee Horn can't come in."

"And why can't he?"

"He isn't an active member of The Bengal Tigers. He is delinquent in his dues."

"This is a direct order from the Police Department," said Captain Keil.

"Oh, all right then." But they let Peewee in with very bad grace.

Captain Keil took the Frosts aside a few steps.

"Do either of you know

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anything about this?" he asked.

"I don't even know what it's about," said Fred Frost.

"Did either of you hear any sort of disturbance last night?"

"I was disturbed by our telephone a number of times," said Fred.

"Who was phoning?"

"The neighbors. They complained about the noise of my power tools. I explained to them that the invention I've been working on for the last few weeks is a general-purpose noise eliminator. Still, it is very hard to fabricate a sheet-metal model quietly. And some tempers were lost on all sides."

"And what time did this particular disturbance cease?"

"Oh, they got tired and stopped phoning at two or three in the morning."

"I mean, when did you abate the noise of your power tools?"

"Five o'clock, maybe. Then I went to bed. It seems I had just got to sleep when you had me roused, but I must have slept a couple of hours."

"Did you hear any sort of noise in the ravine last night?"

"I did not. And I'm willing to bet nobody else did. The noise I was making would have effectively drowned out any other sound in the neighborhood."

"Did you go out of the house at all last night?"

"Probably. I get absent-minded when I'm working on an invention. I believe I put my lathe on automatic once or twice and went out for a beer."

"Did you walk in the ravine last night?"

"I don't remember it, but I may have. I often do. I never notice where I'm walking when I'm concentrating."

"Did you talk to anyone last night?"

"I am just not sure of that, officer."

"Ask him why he doesn't put the baffled the other way in his noise machine," said Carnadine. "That way he could stop the up-and-down noises as well as the sideways noises."

"Little girl, I told you to stay in that dollhouse."

"It is as much as my life is worth to go back in that clubhouse. I have just been expelled from The Bengal Tigers. It's quite a comedown for me. I was First Stripe, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"That's the leader. And now I go in fear of my life. As you know, we cannot allow any living ex-members. Our secrets are too horrible. What if the world should learn of them?"

"I shudder," said Captain Keil.

"So now I can only wait the hand of the assassin," said

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Carnadine. "Fortunately it will not be long."

"In a way I hope not," said Captain Keil. "But I believe we can offer you police protection against the worst assassins that The Bengal Tigers can muster."

"A lot of good your police protection did that dead man in the ravine," said Carnadine.

"What? What's this?" asked Fred Frost.

"You will learn in a minute," said the Captain. "Now you, little girl, go back in that dollhouse and tell the rest of The Bengal Tigers to be quieter."

"All right. But if they kill me I'll hold you personally responsible."

A surly man came up to the Captain.

"Why don't you quit picking on kids and send for a hacker to pick up that body in the draw?" he asked. "There's one on E Street, the only one left in the county. He makes dog meat out of carcasses. It's going to be offensive as soon as the sun gets to it."

"And just who are you?" asked the Captain.

"I'm Tyburn Thompson. This is my land you're standing on. That is my little girl you were hollering at. Try hollering at me like that and I'll peel you like a banana. Okay, folks, break it up, all of you beat it. Take that dead hobo with you, Mossback, and old gobble-mouth here, too. Why'd you phone me to come home anyhow?"

"I am giving the orders here," said Captain Keil angrily.

"Not to me you're not," said Tyburn.

Two other men came up. "What's the trouble, Ty?" asked one of them, Hatchel Horn.

"Oh, there's a dead bum down in the draw, and the cops think they have to make a noise about it. Give me a cigar, Carlos, you get them wholesale."

"Are you the other two neighbors?" asked Keil.

"We are neighbors," said Carlos Rey.

"Then we all may as well go and view the body, as long as our mouthy friend has already let the corpse out of the shroud."

They went down the incline and gathered around the dead man. Annalee Frost gave a gasp and a slight shriek, then paled and swayed.

"I shall faint," she said.

"You always say that, but you never do," said Tootsy Horn.

"Have any of you ever seen this man before?" asked the Captain.

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"I've a dim impression that I saw him yesterday afternoon," said Fred Frost. "Can't say just where or when. Maybe I'm wrong though."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Believe I said, 'It's sure hot.' Seems like I said that to someone yesterday. Does seem I saw that face somewhere."

"Could he have been hanging around the ravine?"

"Could have been. Not sure. I'm absent-minded, you know."

"Yes. You mentioned that before."

"I don't believe I ever saw him," said Tyburn Thompson. "I haven't noticed any hoboes around the draw for the last several days. I usually keep an eye open for them and size them up pretty well. On account of the children, you know. None of them ever met a stranger, and some of their best friends are hoboes. The 'boes sleep in the draw sometimes as it's near the railroad. But I haven't seen this one before."

"I haven't seen him," said Hatchel Horn.

"And I believe I have not," said Carlos Rey. "I would recognize anyone who has ever been in my store. I believe that he has not. I see few people other places. I work long hours."

"Have you ever seen him, Judge?"

"Possibly. My memory, like that of Mr. Rey, is a specialized one. I generally remember the men who have appeared before me in court. I have a definite impression that this man has. Still, a man does not look the same dead; and many of the things by which we recognize—voice, manner—are gone."

"But you think he may have appeared before you?"

"He may have. He has, I would say, a criminal-type face. His suit is of the kind issued to a man leaving prison."

"Yes, I know that. If he has not had it off, and he probably hasn't, then he may have worn it for about five days. And the knife could very well be a prison kitchen knife, but they are not standard. It could be from anywhere. It is quite a cheap instrument. Have any of you ladies ever seen this man before?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Annalee Frost.

"He looks like the President of Paraguay," said Rose Rey. "You think that possible?"

"No," said Captain Keil. "And you, Tootsy—pardon me, Mrs. Horn—have you ever seen this man?"

"It is very unlikely," said Mrs. Horn.

So that was all of it for a while. A few more officers came out. And the neighbors

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were all cautioned not to move out of the neighborhood suddenly. Then the officials took the dead man away and adjourned downtown.

"It's clear enough, almost too clear," said Captain Gold. "Whoever killed didn't bother to remove his identity."

They were going through the dead man's effects. His billfold was from a prison workshop; they are sold in several states and are recognizable. His prison papers were in order. He had $3. Had he been killed by another hobo, he would hardly have been left with the $3 unless the killing was for a deeper reason. And his name was Charles Coke. He had been released from prison exactly a week before. They were waiting now for his dossier.

"A confidence man," said Captain Gold, "a forger and blackmailer. And he did five years. We are having it checked further."

"Five full years?" asked Captain Keil. "No time off?"

"No. He had a record of altercations inside. He was capable of violence. Of his previous blackmail victims none of them live nearby, and besides they pretty well revealed themselves in obtaining his conviction. There could have been a victim held in abeyance while he was in prison; or there could be a new victim that he had marked out from information obtained in prison. It almost has to be the blackmail side of his talents. Neither confidence dodges nor forgeries commonly lead to murder."

"Was he killed *in situ*?" asked Keil.

"I don't know," said Gold. "There's no reason to doubt it, outside of my plain doubtishness. He may not have been killed *in situ*, or even in suit—that is, not in the clothes he was wearing."

"Why do you say that?"

"The fit of them was far from perfect."

"Well, it was not a bad enough fit to be grotesque. And prison fittings are not usually perfect."

"There was one other thing. The absent-minded machinist-inventor, Frost, has come in with a little more information. He is sure now that he did see the man the day before, but that he saw him dressed differently, and that it was somewhere in the street, not in the ravine."

"But is the memory of an admittedly absent-minded man worth anything?"

"Yes. Something. Yet a confidence man will usually acquire several appearances as

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quickly as he can. Coke may quite well have gotten hold of some decent clothes, and yet also kept the prison issue. He may also have set himself up in two different sets of rooms, though so far we have not been able to find a trace of any residence."

"If he had been out only a week, he may not have had any more money than we found on him, and may not have been able to obtain rooms at all."

"Not Coke. From his history he would never have been without operating money. He would not have come out of prison empty-handed."

"Did you tell Frost to be quiet about what he had seen, or thought that he had seen?"

"No, I did not," said Gold foxily. "If even that little news is out, it may worry someone. We haven't much to go on, but the more people we can worry, the more chance we have of smoking something out. And now that we have given it a chance to smolder, I have sent for the five neighbor families to appear again—this time, singly."

But they didn't get much out of them this time either. There is a trick of taking a picture of a site, then a later picture of the same site; then a little business of infra-red will reveal any change. Captain Gold had this trick of analyzing evidence. But the variations of the stories told by the neighbors the first and second times were small, and appeared insignificant, and could have been accidental.

Fred Frost could bring no more out of his tricky memory than he had already fished out. Tyburn Thompson had found new words of invective against officialdom but no new information on the case at hand. Carlos Rey now thought that he might have sold a cigar to that man some years before. But he would not swear to this, nor could he recall for certain the brand of the cigar, besides, it might have been a different man.

Hatchel Horn hadn't known anything about it before, didn't know anything about it now, and didn't expect to know anything about it in the future. And when the sergeant said that Judge Schermerhorn was outside, the Captains were still without a lead.

"Good afternoon, Judge. We were wondering if there was anything more you could tell us about the unfortunate affair that happened in your neighborhood."

"Should I have something more to tell you? Has any of the other neighbors been of help?"

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"Yes, Fred Frost has been of immeasurable help. He stated that he had seen the dead man on the day before in other and better clothes, in other circumstances, and in a slightly different location."

"I see. I was afraid that he might remember. I should not have been so cowardly from the first. But you would have found out soon in any case. Of course you have minutely gone over the transcript of his sentencing of five years ago?"

"What? Oh, of course, of course, minutely."

"And naturally the first thing that struck your eye was that I was the sentencing judge."

"What? Oh, naturally, naturally. And then, ah, then we did recall that you had said that just possibly this man had appeared before you, but that you could not be sure: a man does not, as you pointed out, look the same in death. And as a judge has thousands of men appear before him, you could very well not have been sure."

"Quite so. But since you have gone over the transcript, since you read with what violence that man spoke out—for even the typed copy must have carried some echo of the violence in that man—when you had read that he had sworn in court to get me when his time was over, then you realized that I must have remembered him."

"What? Oh, yes, then we realized it all, didn't we, Keil?"

"Ah, well, why, yes, that was when we realized it."

"So, gentlemen, to save you the time, I have typed a complete summary of my actions in this unhappy affair. Here it is. Please forgive whatever misspellings you find in it. I am a broken man and have been in a highly nervous state for the last several days. You have already guessed the tenor of the contents."

"Ah, yes, we have. Haven't we, Keil? But tell us briefly."

"I had lately retired. I had moved to this town as quietly and unobtrusively as possible, one thousand miles from where he had seen me last. I learned the day he would get out and I knew that he intended to kill me. But I had some hope that he would not be able to follow me here. I was wrong.

"I was not yet settled in my house, I was not entirely moved in, you understand, when he came up the front steps, nattily dressed. I thought it was one of my new neighbors calling to welcome me. I barely recognized him in time. Then I quickly locked the door. But for the fact that Mr. Frost passed by at that time, I believe Coke would have broken in the

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door and had me then. They exchanged some commonplaces, Coke and Frost, and I realized to my dismay that Frost, who is absent-minded, believed Coke to be me, the man who was just moving in.

"Coke left then. But he called to me that he would be back after dark, and that there was nothing I could do to prevent his evening up our score. I spent the next few hours in an agony of worry. I had no gun in the house, and was afraid to venture out. Totally unacquainted in town, and with my telephone not yet connected, I had no idea what to do. And the banshee wails that rose from the workshop of Mr. Frost after dark added to my unease. Coke could shoot me a dozen times and not a soul would hear."

"And then?"

"Coke came to the front door about midnight and called to me. There was a hypnotic quality in his voice. I had heard of it, had felt it before. He said that his was the stronger will, and that he would force me to open the door to my own destruction.

"However, as quietly as possible, I slipped through the house, out the back door, and down to that dark ravine. I thought I could hide there while he broke into my house, or that I could get to one of the neighbors for help. I was looking for someone, anyone, to save me. And I was relieved when I came on a shabby-looking man there.

" 'My life is in danger,' I said. 'Help me. Help me to get to the police or to some safe shelter.' I came quite close to him. And then—"

"Yes?"

"Nightmare of nightmares! I thought I had lost my mind. That shabby man was also Coke! He had tricked me, read my mind. He must have left the front door even before I slipped through the back. I had imagined him nattily dressed as he had appeared that afternoon. But he had come dressed like a hobo, and he paralyzed me with fright."

"Go on."

"He took out a knife and we grappled. It was as though he intended to play with me. But he slipped there in the dampness of the ravine. We fell together. And I do not know what fortune it was, good or bad, that ruled; but it was he and not I who died of the knife when we fell."

"Go on."

"There is no more to go on to. I was a coward. I was unsettled in my mind. I went back to my house and did nothing from that time to this.

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But I swear to God I did not mean to kill. No, in all truth I do not believe I would have killed a man even to save my own life. I am incapable of it. It was sheer accident."

"Naturally. But I would not worry. It is in the five-year-old transcript, as you say, that he swore to kill you. And he came a thousand miles after you immediately on his release; you didn't go after him. I believe that there was never a more clear-cut case of self-defense."

"Well, that rather wraps it up," said Captain Gold. "We should get a commendation for this."

"Tell me, John," asked Captain Keil, "had you read the transcript of the sentencing?"

"Of course not, no more than you did."

"Then you didn't know that Schermerhorn was actually the presiding judge on the case, or that Coke had threatened his life?"

"Naturally not. Let that be our little secret. It is fortunate that Judge Schermerhorn gave us credit for more diligence and more intelligence than we possess."

"Will he get off?"

"Of course he'll get off. Clear-cut a case as I ever saw."

It was early morning. The birds were singing, except that one black one who just pecked and grumbled and hadn't a trace of song in his soul.

Mossback McCarty was resting on the bench in front of the clubhouse of The Bengal Tigers Unaffiliated.

"Mr. McCarty," said Carnadine Thompson. "I have a question to ask."

"This is where I came in. I do not know how to get blood off a knife, nor gore off a bludgeon. I do not even know how to remove telltale marks from a revolver."

"What on earth are you talking about? I wanted to ask you whether you were satisfied with the disposition of our famous criminal case?"

"Why, I suppose so. Shouldn't I be?"

"The Bengal Tigers are not satisfied with it. Or perhaps I should say that I, as First Stripe, am not satisfied with it. Let me ask you: did you ever see a distinguished and dignified-looking judge?"

"Yes, of course. You have only to think of Mr. Schermerhorn."

"All right. Think of some more."

"Why, all of them. All judges are distinguished-looking gentlemen."

"No. Think real hard. Was there ever one?"

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"Well, since you insist, no, I never did see a distinguished-looking judge. All of them have something a little furtive about them—fox-faced, sly, rather disreputable."

"Something like the image of a low confidence man?"

"Why, yes, Carnadine, something like that."

"And now tell me: did you ever see a confidence man who looked furtive, fox-faced, sly, disreputable?"

"Why, all of them, Carnadine. We have only to think of Coke when we saw him dead."

"Think of some more. It is possible that you have known more confidence men than I have."

"That's possible. Why, all of them are fox-faced and disreputable-looking."

"Think real hard. Was there ever one?"

"Come to think of it, no. As a matter of fact, all of them have an inspiring presence. They are the most imposing, distinguished, dignified men on the face of the earth. In fact, they look rather like—"

"Like judges? Like judges are supposed to look? Mr. McCarty, you go right downtown and tell them that they may have their men mixed up. Warn them of the dangers of taking things for granted. And tell them that if they take the most elementary fingertip test, which they should have done anyhow, then they can tell for sure. And tell them downtown that you are too good a man to be pounding a beat out here. For the reputation of The Bengal Tigers we have to get rid of you. And this is the only way I know how to do it."

McCarty went about it rather lamely.

"I have new information from one of the neighbors," he said, "that leads me to believe we are not sure of the identity of the two men."

"From one of the neighbors we questioned?" asked Captain Gold.

"No. From one of the neighbors you neglected to question."

Coke had spoken the truth in one thing. Coke had said that Coke was a man of violence. And so he was for a few moments, until subdued by three burly policemen. Then his violence proved to be short, and he talked easily.

"Oh, well, I guess I've come to the end of my rope in several ways. Details? Oh, the judge was easy enough to find. I'd kept track of him all the way. I even collected a commission when he bought his new house, and that was before I was

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released. And it didn't take me a week to come the thousand miles; it took me only three hours. I was in town before he was.

"I knew how much money he had transferred here. I knew that I could write his name as well as he could. And I made sure that he had transmitted everything by mail, and was not likely to be known by sight to a single person in this town.

"I observed his moving in and the fact that he tried to avoid being seen, as he was deadly afraid of me. I figured that his clothing, but not his face, might be familiar to his neighbors from their brief glimpses. And we are nearly the same size. It is true that Dumbler, Frost, exchanged civilities with him, and I would have to find a place for that in my story.

"My idea, of course, was to kill the judge and then to become the judge, with access to eighty thousand dollars under the name that I could write as well as he. And that's just what I did.

"I came to his door at night, introduced myself as an insurance salesman with an insurance salesman's voice, and I had one foot in the door before he recognized me. I forced him at gunpoint to strip, and we changed clothes from the skin out. Then I marched him to the ravine and killed him there.

"I had two choices: to do nothing and see if there was any chance of being suspected; or to give up with a maudlin confession in my identity as the judge. If it fell out the one way, I was set up for life here. If it fell out the other way, then I would go through the formality of a short trial, be cleared, and still be settled and respected for life—or at least have a rich base to start from should I become bored and want to return to my regular business again.

"But who is the smart aleck who wanted more positive identification after the case was already wrapped up to everyone's satisfaction? What fresh mind saw the sure-to-be-missed obvious which I was sure would never be seen? Tell me, who outsmarted me?"

"Ah, one of our promising new talents," said Captain Keil. "Our Number Nine, in fact."

"Going on Ten," said Mossback McCarty.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 354th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "In No Other Place" struck us as being an unusual "first story," especially in its conception . . .

When the author, Muriel Ludlow Olson, submitted the story, she was 68 years old. Yes, life can begin at 68—it can begin at any age. Three issues ago, you'll recall, we published a "first story" written by McGarry Morley—at the age of 75!

Mrs. Olson is a widow who lives alone but "has a wealth of children, grandchildren, and friends." Years ago—many years ago—she "did some writing," but the records are understandably vague or nonexistent. Before she could consider writing as a career, she "was busy raising children, gardening, etc." Now, she informs us, "I belong to Senior Citizen groups and go on trips with them and take classes in arts and crafts, oils and watercolors. I belong to the Seattle Mountaineers and enjoy hiking in the mountains." She also likes to play the organ—and still has found the time, energy, and ambition to start writing again at 68. (You young writers—don't ever say you are discouraged!)

IN NO OTHER PLACE

by MURIEL LUDLOW OLSON

IT STARTED WHEN I awoke in a strange place. I could almost laugh, for I thought, I really thought, I was in Heaven. The bed on which I lay was more comfortable than I had dreamed possible. There were beautiful flowers on the night table. I still hurt all over, but that was from the fall. I had been nailing up the wooden shutters for the winter and fell from the ladder. If my beloved husband, Joshua Longstaff, had been living it would not have happened. My name is Rachel Longstaff, born Rachel Putney in Salem, in His Majesty's

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colony, Massachusetts, in the year 1670. Remember my name. No matter what they say, I am Rachel Longstaff.

I was not in Heaven, I was in a hospital. The doctors wore white garments somewhat the way I imagined the Angel Gabriel might be attired. But the nurses—well, really! Skirts half-way up their thighs! Right among the men. Shameless. I should have known at once that it was not Heaven.

A young couple came to see me. The man had a beard and sideburns, which was a comforting sight. But the girl—his wife I was told—she wore trousers! Still, it was better than showing your limbs. Why, I would never even show my ankles! I was confused enough, but you can imagine my feelings when they called me "Mother." I gently explained that my one and only child, a son, had died of the Fever back in 1697, five years ago, the same Fever that also took my beloved husband.

They seemed much distressed. The man told me that he was my son, born in 1948—*1948*—that his name was Edward Bentz, and that his father—my husband!—had been killed in the same auto accident that had put me in the hospital. Then he broke down and cried, and his wife—her name was Sherryl—put her arms around him and cried with him.

I was sorry for them, but what could I do? I didn't know what an "auto" accident was. Automatic? All I did was fall off the ladder. I tried to tell them. They kept saying didn't I know I was Mrs. James Bentz? Laura Bentz? Didn't I remember—didn't I remember—remember—? I stopped trying to explain. Nothing was real—the place, the people—I must be in a delirium. When I awoke it would all go away.

Only it didn't. Each day I awoke to the same white walls, the same half-naked nurses, the same couple who said I had a concussion, but not to worry. I would remember in time. So gradually the truth came to me. Someone had put a hex on me. Prudence Peck. She always had an eye on my Joshua, sweet-talking him, asking him to help her with little things. My Joshua was an upright, God-fearing man, and her wiles didn't get very far, I can tell you, especially with me watching. Now that I thought about it, as little by little my bones were healing, she was the one who gave my husband and little boy the Fever. When she saw she couldn't get anywhere with him, she destroyed him, and my innocent little child, too. She is a witch—and never caught at it!

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My severest shock came when I saw myself in a mirror. I didn't know it was a mirror, but thought it was another person facing me. When I learned that I was indeed looking at myself, I fainted. It wasn't I. It was a totally strange woman! The doctor was angry that I had been up, and the fall to the floor did my ribs no good.

I overheard him talking to my "son" when they thought the door was closed. "I would say your mother is either making up this fantasy or she has some form of amnesia. Subconsciously she's objecting to modern life."

"I don't believe it," Ed said. I now called them Ed and Sherryl. "She remembers things in such detail about this other life. I've never believed in regression or reincarnation, or whatever it's called—"

"Bosh! You know better than that. You say she liked reading romantic historical novels. She's creating a life which she considers more interesting. The sooner you can get her home and back to her normal life, the better. If the fantasy persists, I recommend a psychiatrist."

Eventually I did leave the hospital and went to live with my "family." I said no more about my true life. It only upset them. Inasmuch as the hex had transported me into this strange new world, I must learn to live in it. Some things were decided improvements over what I was used to. Water, even hot water, by just turning a handle—no running out to the well. Heat and cooking without building a fire. Light by just pushing a button. Soft rugs with some sort of monster running over them to clean them.

And I learned what an auto is. In fact, that was what I left the hospital in. I was terrified. No, I prefer a horse. Yes, and I prefer getting my own water from a well and building my own fire. I wanted to go home. Oh, how I wanted to go home to my own familiar things, to my own friends. And particularly I wanted to go home to expose Prudence Peck for the witch that she is before she ruins any more homes.

Then I saw her. Here, here in this home in *this* world! The same pretty doll face, all painted up. She was going under a different name, of course—as Mrs. Caldwell. But I knew her. And she knew me. She said, "Oh, my dear. I'm so sorry about the loss of your husband. So very sorry." The effrontery! I couldn't even speak.

Sherryl said, "Mrs. Caldwell has asked about you many

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times since the accident." Then to Prudence, "Mother is still far from well, but we are pleased at the improvement."

I turned without a word and left the room. I was shaking so hard that I thought I, too, must have the Fever. She had actually followed me here to wreak more havoc on my already ruined life. And she could harm Ed and Sherryl, two more innocents. I must warn them. But how? They say there is no such thing as a witch. I found that out one day when I asked how they dealt with witches here in this world. No law here, as at home. So there was only one way open to me. I, myself, must kill her. And kill her so she would be truly dead, for witches can come back, as you know.

I got books from the library and decided the best way was a spike through the heart. In Ed's workshop in the basement I found the spike, a long clean one, and a hammer to drive it in. It occurred to me that she might not stand still for all that, so to make sure I took a butcher knife from the kitchen. Strike first with the knife, then when she was on the floor, hammer in the spike.

Sherryl and Ed were delighted when I mentioned that I was sorry for my behaviour towards Mrs. Caldwell and would like to call on her to make amends. I had what I needed safely hidden in the oversized purse which Sherryl had given me, so she said, on my birthday. No, I didn't want Ed to take me, I told him. I must get used to being on my own.

They smiled their approval and summoned what they called a cab. "It will take you right to her door. Pay him when you get out. You remember how to use a cab? When you are ready to leave, just telephone for another cab. Or call us. Mrs. Caldwell will help you. She is expecting you."

I wanted to tell him that when I was ready to leave, there would be no cab, no telephone, no this world. Her spell would be broken and I would return to my own home and my own true self. And no Ed and Sherryl, I thought a little sadly, for I had grown to love them as though they were indeed my own.

I hesitated, sorely tempted. It was so very pleasant here. But I sternly strengthened my resolve. I have never shirked a duty. It was plainly my duty, and mine alone, to rid the world of Prudence Peck. She would never be able to hurt Ed and Sherryl, as was certainly her purpose.

When the cab arrived I

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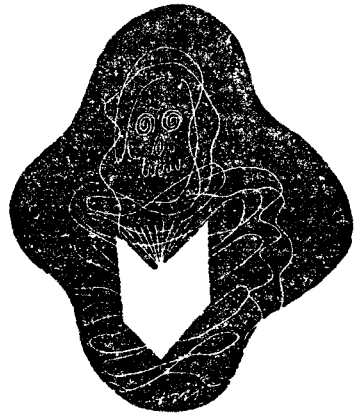
turned back and hugged and kissed my "children," and cried a little. Sherryl said, "Mother, hadn't I better go with you?" and I said, "No, of course not."

I paid the cab driver. I was welcomed into the house by Prudence, all gushing and false smiles. I only waited until the door was closed. Then I did what I had to do.

Something went wrong. The hex must have been stronger than I thought. Or I had not used the proper way to kill a witch. I did not return to my own home and life. I tried to explain to the judge, to the doctor, to anyone who would listen. They could not understand that I *had* to do it. That there was no law here, as at home, to take care of witches. Could they not see that it was up to me to keep her from doing more harm?

So here I am. They call it a hospital for the criminally insane. But I know. This is Hell, and all the events since falling off the ladder have been leading me here. My only regret is for Ed and Sherryl. They took it so hard. But they are really not my children, and already they are beginning to recede in my memory. In fact, they were probably never real at all.

Only Prudence Peck remains. She put me here. And somewhere, somewhere in this big place—I *know* she must be here. An evil witch like Prudence Peck could be in no other place.



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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Interest seems to have been roused by my inquiry into the term "son of a bitch," its origin and history. One correspondent, serious or otherwise, informed me that Madame Curie, visiting this country after World War I, expressed a wish to meet "Mrs. O'Bitch," who had so many sons in the American Army.

"And need philological research end there?" asks another correspondent. "Surely other such terms deserve attention, in particular certain four-letter words hitherto barred by prudery from everyday use?"

Perhaps, but I think not. Most such words are old English; they may be found in Chaucer. Besides, although practically any word may appear in print today, your friendly critic must excercise at least some small measure of good taste.

"Now forget what you're *not* going to say!" the reader of this column may well observe. "What the devil *do* you say?"

Well, once more I have had luck. The four titles here examined are all new, our third item none the worse for being a paperback original. Permit me to laud two detective novels far from lacking in excitement, one mystery-adventure whose dirty work spans half Europe, and one real-life biography of an underworld baron from the nineteen thirties.

The protagonist of *Rat Race*, by Dick Francis (Harper & Row, $5.95), is neither a professional jockey nor even a follower of the turf. But Matt Shore, former airline pilot now conducting taxi flights to British race meets, heads straight through atmospheric disturbance at the track as well as up there. We meet easy-going Colin Ross; we very much meet Colin's sister, Nancy, who begins by calling Matt a bloody skunk and ends with sentiments somewhat the reverse.

From the moment our Cherokee plane erupts in flames on the ground, this particular event becomes a race against villainy amid so many aristocratic and/or dubious characters, from Major Tyderman and Annie Villars to the Duke of Wessex himself.

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Forever as ingenious as fair, the author has also learned deft construction: his sensational finale includes its equally sensational disclosure. Though I myself am no more a racegoer than Matt Shore or John H. Watson, I back this one.

In *Ashes to Ashes*, by Emma Lathen (Simon & Schuster, $5.95), for the second time this year Miss Lathen faces her banker-detective with a problem which seems beyond even John Putnam Thatcher of the Sloan Guaranty Trust. When Cardinal Devlin wants to dispose of impoverished St. Bernadette's Parochial School, in the New York Borough of Queens, bitter opposition to his plan engenders strife, riot, and murder.

It is difficult for a backwoods Presbyterian to share such very strong emotion at the threatened closing of their school. But we need not share an emotion to understand it; these people are all thoroughly, understandably human. And other kinds of emotion can produce similar results: a bomb threat to the Sloan engenders near-riot at that sacred bank itself. Though the author might have given us more clues, her solution is a stunner. Be warned.

The publishers state at once that in Don Smith's *The Padrone* (Fawcett, 75¢) our hero will tangle with the Mafia. No disservice is done. Some European spider has wrought a web intricate enough, deadly enough, to keep nerves on edge and blood at fever-heat.

When a bomb explodes aboard the private jet of Thomas Garfield, American tycoon with one base at Geneva, the sole survivor, blonde Doris Conway, proves to be so much more (and so much less) than the high-class prostitute she seems. Neither bullets nor blondes deter Tim Sullivan in his chase from Amsterdam to Geneva, from Rome to Palermo. In one old-fashioned sense we are taken for a ride, but—*corpo di Bacco!*—it's a joy-ride.

As contrast to some fictitious old-time hoods of the item above, a biography of Arthur Flegenheimer, who became Dutch Schultz, *Kill the Dutchman!* by Paul Sann (Arlington, $8.95) presents some real old-time hoods when they still remained alive and, for a while, kicking.

This moral tale starts with the blasts which mowed down Schultz and some friends at a Newark tavern, then traces the Dutchman's career from its Yorkville beginning through his rise to power as king of Harlem's numbers racket and, alliteratively, Beer Baron of the Bronx before that gory end. Mr. Sann, himself an old time newsman, has vividly conjured up what used to be.

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a NEW detective novelet by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

What the Sergeant discovered on his five o'clock rounds in the shed behind the sports pavilion of the San Stefano Military Academy started a double investigation—one conducted by the Commandante, General Ramirez, and one by Colonel Cristobal Ocampos, head of the Security Police. The intense rivalry impelled both men to seek the truth—each in his own fashion.

An unusual detective novelet—unusual not only for the highly gifted Michael Gilbert, but for any writer in the field . . .

THE WRONG FOX

by MICHAEL GILBERT

SERGEANT TORRERO, who was in charge of the in-lying picquet at the San Stefano Military Academy, made his final rounds at five o'clock in the morning.

The two previous rounds—at midnight and at three o'clock—had encompassed the buildings and courtyards. On this occasion, at 5:00, he and his four-man escort made a detour around the inside of the walls that surrounded the sports ground.

A single light showed from one of the small sheds behind the pavilion. It was instinct which sent the Sergeant's hand to the butt of his revolver before he kicked open the door. He stood staring into the room for a long moment. He was a veteran of the War of Liberation. When he turned round at last, his face, seamed and scarred like a stump of old oak, betrayed no hint of his feelings.

Indicating each member of the patrol in turn he said, "You will stay here, outside the door, and allow no one to enter. You

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will fetch the Commandante. You two will come back with me to the guardroom. At the double."

The telephone buzzed softly in the office of Colonel Cristobal Ocampos, in the Seguridad Building on the Avenue Diaz. Ocampos, who appeared to be expecting the call, put down the file he was studying, picked up the receiver, and said, "Ocampos here. Cardozo? Yes. Where are you speaking from?"

"The guardroom. The telephone is an outside line. It is not connected with the Academy exchange."

"Excellent. Proceed."

"The boy has been identified. He was Basilio de Casal. A first-year cadet at the Academy."

"And it was suicide?"

"Our first conclusion was that it could have been suicide. He would appear to have hanged himself by climbing onto a pile of benches, then jumping from the top. The rope he used came from a longer piece, in a corner of the shed."

"Your *first* conclusion?"

"Then I noticed blood on the boy's shirt, at the back—"

Lieutenant Cardozo continued to speak for nearly two minutes. At the end of it Ocampos said, "So then the Commandante arrived. What is his name? General Ramirez Yes, I know him And he warned you off, eh?"

"He took charge of the matter."

"We can be frank with each other, Lieutenant. Did the General order you to stop your investigation?"

"In effect, yes."

"Did he give any reason?"

"He said that it was clearly a suicide. The matter would be fully looked into by the Police of the Military District."

"Who could be trusted to act discreetly?"

"That was the impression I obtained. You know there have been other—incidents—at the Academy."

"Yes," said the Colonel. "You say that you are in the guardroom. Who is the Sergeant in charge?"

"His name is Torrero. He seems to be a good man."

"Where is General Ramirez?"

"Still down at the pavilion, I imagine. There are quite a few men there now. The doctor has come, and there is a Colonel Villagra, of the Military District, who seems to be in charge—"

Ocampos was not really listening. He said, "Never mind that. Ask Torrero to take you to Cadet de Casal's room."

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"To his room?"

"He will know where it is. Get there quickly and examine it. If you find anything of interest, bring it back here with you."

"I don't think General Ramirez will like it."

"The quicker you move," said Ocampos smoothly, "the less likely General Ramirez will know anything about it."

He hung up and resumed his study of the file. It was a fat file, labeled *Sriola*. It had three red stars pasted on its cover.

He was still reading an hour later when Lieutenant Cardozo was shown in. He was a good-looking young man, with thick black hair and a nose which had an attractive bend in it, the result of a difference of opinion with a drunken mestizo during his recruit service.

"How I wish," said Ocampos, closing the file, "that we had a Smersh here."

"A Smersh?"

"You have not heard of Smersh? It is a famous Russian organization. It removes traitors who have taken refuge in other countries. Think how useful such an organization would be to us, if only a poor country like this could afford it. What luxury! How easily it would dispose of some of our problems! I would simply summon the Chief of Smersh to my office and say to him, 'Proceed to such-and-such a neighboring country and dispose of General Sriola. And poof!' Ocampos blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling. "No more Sriola. Please be seated, Lieutenant. You were up early. You have had a tiring morning."

"I managed to get into his room—"

"What is our major problem? It is that we are a small country. We are surrounded on all sides by larger countries, all hostile to us. So, when he is unmasked, what does a traitor like General Sriola do? He simply drives to one or another of our frontiers. How can poor ignorant soldiers be blamed for not stopping him—a General, in full uniform, flying an official flag on the front of his car? He crosses the bridge. He is among our enemies who are, automatically, his friends. But I am interrupting you, Lieutenant."

"I have here with me—" Cardozo indicated the bulging briefcase.

"Your worm."

Cardozo looked baffled.

"It is a saying. The early bird catches the worm. You were at the vital point ahead of General Ramirez. You have been rewarded."

As he spoke, Ocampos was plucking out the contents of

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the brief case, one by one, and laying them out on his desk—a fat blackbird picking a worm from the lawn.

A white linen robe. A red-covered exercise book with the words *Field Fortification* written in purple ink on the cover. Then half a dozen books, none of them new. Finally, a framed photograph.

"There were other things, of course," said Cardozo. "Many other things. Textbooks of military science, uniforms, underclothes, personal belongings of the sort one would expect to find in the room of a cadet."

"Yes," said Ocampos. He was examining the books. "Then why did you select these books in particular?"

"They were not on the shelves with the other books. They were in a closet, at the back. Almost, one might say, hidden."

Ocampos was examining the most battered of the books. It had no front cover or flyleaf, but the title could still be read, in faded gold lettering along the spine: *Galizische Geschichten.*

"Do you speak German?"

"No, Colonel. What does it mean?"

"It means *Tales from Galicia.* It has the date of publication here—see? MDCCCLXXVI."

"That I *can* translate," said Cardozo with a smile. "1876, is it not?"

"Correct. Since it has only the one date it could be a first edition. If it were not in such a deplorable condition it might be valuable." He was opening the other books as he spoke. Four of them were medical textbooks, also in German. The sixth, and last, was in Spanish, and was titled *The Lives of the Martyrs.*

"A curious soldier, young Basilio," said Ocampos. He opened the red-covered notebook.

"I happened to glance inside it," said Cardozo. "It did not appear to be concerned with Field Fortification or, indeed, with any other branch of military science. It had more the appearance of a private diary, or memorandum book. Did I do rightly to take it?"

"Who can tell?" said the Colonel. He walked across to the big safe, spun the dial, opened the door, and placed the book inside. "Who can tell? Scraps of paper, they can be the most important things in the world. A scrap of paper sent Captain Dreyfus to Devil's Island. Another scrap of paper brought him out again."

He closed the safe and returned to the table.

"And this photograph?" It was a framed enlargement,

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inscribed and signed, of an informal snapshot. It showed a big handsome young man with an arrogant beak of a nose and rather full lips. He was dressed in riding togs, with polished boots and spurs, and had a riding switch tucked under one arm. "Why, particularly, did you bring this to me?"

Lieutenant Cardozo said, the embarrassment evident in his voice, "I recognized it. I thought—"

"You thought—yes?"

"It is the Leader's son, Juvenal Valdez, is it not?"

"Correct. Juvenal is a cadet at the College. In his third year. No doubt he is a friend of Basilio's. Did you find the idea surprising?"

Ocampos was grinning at his Lieutenant's discomfort.

"Basilio de Casal, they told me, came from a poor family. Moreover, it is a Febrerista family. His father was arrested during the Troubles when our Leader came to power. He was kept for some months under house arrest, I believe."

"Your information is accurate. But youth pays little attention to wealth or politics. The boys could have been friends. However—"

The Colonel reopened the safe and put the photograph in beside the red-covered notebook.

It was two hours later and Colonel Ocampos was drinking a cup of coffee, his third of the day, when Colonel Villagra of the Military District Police was shown in. Since the two men were of equal rank, neither wasted effort on ceremony. Ocampos waved Villagra toward a chair. Villagra ignored the gesture, put his broad bottom on the edge of the table, and said, "I am told that one of your men, Lieutenant Cardozo, visited the room of Cadet de Casal this morning and removed certain items of his property."

"Indeed?"

"No doubt he was under the impression that he was doing his duty, but I must point out that General Ramirez has entrusted me with the conduct of this case."

"What case?"

"The case of Cadet de Casal. You are surely aware that he hanged himself last night."

"I was aware that his body was found suspended from a hook, in a shed behind the sports pavilion. Does that constitute a case? And if so, against whom? Or is it intended that there should be some procedure taken against this cadet for the crime of committing suicide?"

"You know very well that a matter like this must be investigated. Particularly since

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there have been other incidents."

"Two other incidents. Three years ago Cadet Ruffio was shot in the armory. A Court of Inquiry decided that it was an accident. Twelve months ago Cadet Under-Officer Perez, a very promising young man, jumped from the roof of the drill hall, fell sixty feet, and broke his neck. There was a suggestion, I believe, that he might have been engaged in some skylarking escapade. Incidentally, *how* long ago did General Ramirez assume control of the Academy? Three years ago, was it? Or four? Times goes so fast."

"Your remarks," said Colonel Villagra, his face distorted with anger, "shall be transmitted to General Ramirez. He may see fit to overlook your innuendos—or he may not."

"Innuendos? You are imagining things. I was pointing out that General Ramirez must naturally investigate every—episode—which occurs under his jurisdiction. Particularly if there have been such a number of them."

"Very well, then. And since I have been charged with this investigation—"

"I am sure you will carry it out very thoroughly. For instance, you will no doubt come to some decision on the question of whether Cadet de Casal was flogged before or after he was hanged."

Colonel Villagra said, in a choked voice, "Who told you—this story?"

"One of my subordinates, Lieutenant Cardozo. He happens to live near the Academy. When the Sergeant of the Guard telephoned me I alerted him. Thus he was the first one on the scene. He noticed some blood on the back of the boy's shirt and was interested enough to remove the shirt. The weals were very plain. He had been savagely flogged. Incidentally"—Ocampos deposited an inch of ash from his cigar on to the onyx ashtray on his desk—"the Sergeant and the members of the guard *all* saw the marks."

Colonel Villagra said, "Why did he report this to you, and not to me?"

"Two reasons, I imagine. First, because he is my subordinate and would naturally report to me. Second, because I am in charge of the investigation."

"Possibly you did not hear me. I told you that General Ramirez had specifically placed me in charge."

"Do I gather that General Ramirez is questioning the direct order of our Leader."

"The direct—?"

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"Given to me, personally, an hour ago. If you would like to confirm it my telephone is at your disposal. The red one has a direct line to the Chancellery."

"I will inform General Ramirez," said Colonel Villagra in a stifled voice.

"I'm afraid he was angry with me," said Ocampos to Lieutenant Cardozo ten minutes later. "General Ramirez will be angry, too. It is a mistake to get angry particularly at this hot and humid season. It engorges the arteries and thus places a strain on the heart." He considered whether he should light another cigar, and rejected the idea.

"What shall we do now?"

"We have been charged with this investigation. We shall proceed with it. *You* will proceed with it. You will go down to the Academy and question all concerned. By now General Ramirez will have received confirmation of our Leader's edict, and you will find that you will receive full cooperation. I am afraid it will be a considerable task. You may take as much assistance as you wish. Two Sergeants, half a dozen men. Shorthand writers. I leave the details to you with every confidence, Lieutenant."

"I will do my best."

"I'm sure you will. And, by the way, a suggestion. You should certainly have a word with the boy's term officer. A Captain Hernandez. I believe he has a reputation as a disciplinarian—a very strict disciplinarian."

It was the custom of Dr. Chavez, the benign and bespectacled editor of the *Corriera Nacionale*, personally to sign his more provocative editorials. Some were so provocative that simple-minded readers wondered why the Doctor was not arrested. The more cynical suggested that there was a private telephone line between his office and the Chancellery. Certainly some of his guesses had proved inspired. The *Corriera*, for instance, had been the first and only newspaper to attack General Siriola for misappropriating foreign relief funds, and that was three weeks before the General's hurried departure to a neighboring country.

Three days after the discovery of Basilio's body a signed editorial appeared under banner headlines:

"*Academia De Tragedias*

"The discovery, three days ago, of the body of Cadet Basilio de Casal, a young first-year student at the San Stefano Military Academy, hanging in a shed behind the sports pavilion, has raised in

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many people's minds serious questions of the administration and discipline at this important national institution. People will surely not have forgotten—"

And in case they had forgotten, Dr. Chavez reminded them in a succession of pungent paragraphs of the deaths of Cadet Ruffio and Cadet Under-Officer Perez.

"Where a hundred high-spirited young men are congregated, no one need be surprised at an occasional mishap. But *three* unexplained deaths in less than three years seem to us to be too many. There are two possible explanations. Either the discipline and supervision is too lax, permitting horseplay, bullying and excesses of this sort. Or, as seems more probable, the discipline is too strict.

"Young officers must be taught the value of military discipline, but to enforce it in a barbaric manner, upon their own bodies, does not seem to us to be a course likely to benefit either the recipients of the punishment or its enforcers. Cadets are slow to talk about such matters. Loyalty often blocks criticism. Nevertheless, certain stories are in circulation which are too often repeated to be completely dismissed. Is it, for instance, a coincidence that all three cadets were in the Squadra commanded by Captain Hernandez? Or that Captain Hernandez should be known to his squadristas—jokingly, no doubt—as the 'Slave Driver'—"

Dr. Chavez did not think it a coincidence, and did not scruple to say so, on that day and in the days that followed. Interviews were obtained with members of the Academy staff. Letters were printed from anxious parents of cadets. The name of Captain Hernandez was featured in most of them. His background was investigated by Dr. Chavez's reporters and the results of their researches were set out in many columns of print.

Captain Hernandez came of an aristocratic family, linked by direct descent from the Conquistadores, slave owners and autocrats. His father had fought in the War of Liberation and had been a notorious disciplinarian. Photographs of Captain Hernandez appeared in the papers, grim and unsmiling, a slash of black mustache across a tight-lipped mouth.

It was at the end of the first week that the barrage lifted to a higher target. Dr. Chavez treated his readers to a further signed editorial and a large headline in Latin.

"*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*"

On the assumption that most

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of his readers would have neglected their classical studies, this was followed by a translation: *Who controls the controllers?*

"If, as has been widely suggested," the editorial began, "there exists in the Military Academy a system of private discipline which differs little from sadistic bullying, must one not cast a critical eye on the head of that institution—"

Ocampos, who got advance copies of all newspapers, read this with his first cup of coffee and smiled. He said to Lieutenant Cardozo, "I don't think General Ramirez will like this, do you?"

"I'm afraid he won't."

"How is your investigation proceeding?"

"It would be simpler if it were the only investigation."

"Explain."

"I am not being obstructed, you understand. I have been allowed free access to witnesses. As far as I know they have answered my questions frankly. But the fact that I—that we—are investigating the matter has not stopped General Ramirez from continuing a private investigation of his own. We are using our own officers. He is using the resources of the Military Police. It might be described not only as a double inquiry, but an investigation in parallel."

Ocampos considered the matter in silence for some minutes, drawing evenly on his cigar and watching the blue smoke climb into a curtain over his head.

He said, "Parallel lines never meet. I was taught that at school. Or rather, they meet only at infinity, which is an inconclusive destination. The problem then is, which of you will arrive at the truth first? Tell me frankly, what progress have you made so far?"

"You ask me to speak frankly and I will do so. Progress? Very little."

"I see."

"A number of cadets visited Basilio in his room that night at different times, up to nine o'clock. I have spoken to all of them, and all agree on one point: they say that Basilio was undoubtedly worried."

"Worried about what?"

"It was assumed that he was in some trouble with Captain Hernandez."

"Tell me, Lieutenant. In talking to these cadets did you get an impression of what sort of person Basilio was?"

"Reserved to the point almost of unapproachability. Extremely law-abiding—no one could recollect that he had ever been guilty of the least breach of discipline. Religious in an austere way, which is uncom-

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mon in these laxer times."

"And did that not strike you as a curious contradiction?"

"A contradiction?"

"The estimate you have just given me of Basilio's character. And the fact that, on that one evening, a number of different cadets should have dropped in to his room to talk to him. A perfectly normal proceeding, I agree, if he had been a popular, easy-going, social-minded youth. But not so easy to explain if he was the latter-day saint you depict."

Lieutenant Cardozo considered the matter, and then said, with a smile, "One must remember that he was very good-looking."

"True," said Ocampos. "Much is forgiven to those whom providence has endowed with good looks. Proceed."

"One of the servants who visited Basilio's room on some errand at about ten o'clock found it empty. When he went back at half-past ten it was still empty."

"And was Captain Hernandez in the building at this time?"

"Yes. He was working late that night."

"Was this usual?"

"Quite usual. In term time, when he was busy, he slept more often in the Academy than in his apartment outside."

"One assumption is that Basilio visited Captain Hernandez that evening? That something—untoward—occurred? And that the hanging was an effort to cover it up?"

"Those are certainly possible assumptions."

"But you have no evidence? No actual proof?"

"No."

"And we cannot move without proof?"

"It would be difficult."

"Difficult," agreed Ocampos. "But, so far as our opponents are concerned, not impossible, apparently. Or have they, perhaps, discovered some vital facts which have escaped our notice?"

Cardozo stared at him.

"Just before you arrived," said Ocampos, "I learned that General Ramirez had ordered the arrest of Captain Hernandez."

"On what charge?"

"The charge is causing the death of Cadet Basilio in the course of unauthorized disciplinary proceedings."

"But—"

"Let us restrain our impatience. I have no doubt we shall read all about it in the *Corriera* tomorrow."

And not only the *Corriera* on the next day, but all the newspapers of the capital for

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many days, spread themselves on these exciting topics: the background of the accused and of his supposed victim; the membership of the military tribunal which had been summoned with exemplary speed; the zeal of General Ramirez in seeking out the truth and the earnest desire of their Leader that justice should not only be done but be seen to be done.

During the whole of this time Colonel Cristobal Ocampos hardly left his office. Insofar as he interested himself in the case at all he seemed to be concentrating his attention on the red-covered exercise book which was locked in his safe and labeled in purple ink, *Field Fortification*. Each of the scribbled names, addresses, and telephone numbers in the book had been typed out, by the Colonel's own podgy fingers onto a file card, and each card accumulated, as the days went by, a series of further annotations in the Colonel's sprawling handwriting.

On the evening of the seventh day he sent once more for Lieutenant Cardozo.

The Lieutenant received his orders with evident surprise. He said, "Certainly I will do it. But I was under the impression—" He paused.

"Under what impression, Lieutenant?"

"I had imagined that, in effect, the conduct of this case had passed out of our hands. That it was being conducted by General Ramirez."

"Now I wonder why you should think that," said Ocampos sleepily. "True, I have made no positive move in the matter over the past week. But that was because I could not see that any actual move was called for. You appeared to me to have made all the necessary preliminary investigations in a thorough and painstaking manner—"

The Colonel tapped the bulky folder on his desk. "However, on rereading your reports I did note one omission. You do not appear to have interrogated Cadet Juvenal Valdez. Why was that?"

The Lieutenant shifted uncomfortably.

"Particularly, Lieutenant, when we have evidence that he was a friend of Basilio's. Had he not a photograph of Juvenal on his mantelshelf?"

"Juvenal Valdez, being our Leader's son, is a popular figure in the Academy. Many cadets have such a photograph."

"And were all these photographs personally inscribed to their recipients and signed Juvenal?"

"Well—no."

"I think, Lieutenant, that

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you had better have a word with this young man, and the sooner the better. In fact, immediately."

It was the veteran Sergeant Torrero who accompanied Lieutenant Cardozo across the graveled acres of the parade ground, past the old-fashioned cannon with its perimeter of neatly piled shot, up an echoing flight of stone stairs, along a bare corridor. The Military Academy by night was a place of silence, deep shadows, and sharp lights.

"It's not very homey," said the Lieutenant.

"Soldiers must learn to live without luxury," said the Sergeant. He knocked at a door at the end of the corridor, opened it, and stood aside for the Lieutenant to go in.

Juvenal Valdez was seated in a wicker chair in front of the fire, his slippered feet stretched out to the blaze. He waved a friendly hand, and said, "Come along in, Lieutenant. Sit down. If I'm to be grilled I insist on being grilled in comfort."

He was a thickly built, well-muscled young man with the shoulders of a boxer, black hair, and a handsome face which he must have derived, the Lieutenant concluded, from his mother, Juanita. It had little in common with the thin bloodless look of his father, except possibly for the eyes, which had a certain shrewdness behind the curtain of their candor.

"I have no intention of grilling you," said the Lieutenant, trying to keep the respect out of his voice. "But I thought—we thought—that you might be able to help us on a few points—"

"Does one gather that Colonel Ocampos is hunting a different line from our respected Commandante?"

The directness of the question took the Lieutenant by surprise. He said, "Well—"

"No need to answer if it embarrasses you. Speaking personally, I think General Ramirez is after the wrong fox."

"You do? Who then should he be chasing?"

"It's a difficult question. To answer it you would have to know something of Academy politics and personalities. Ramirez is an old-style aristocrat. He does not approve of my father's policy of allowing young men to come to this college on a basis of ability alone, without regard to family background. In the General's view our Army should be officered only by gentlemen and the sons of gentlemen."

"And you do not agree?"

"I wasn't giving you *my* ideas. They are my father's."

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"And as such, entitled to all respect."

"Within these four walls, Lieutenant, and in the confidence that it will not be repeated, I will tell you something. My father is not God. He is not infallible. Nevertheless, on this point I think he is right. There are not enough gentlemen of appropriate military talent to officer the Army. But you can appreciate that a boy like Basilio, son of an impoverished family—and a Febrensta family into the bargain—would hardly appeal to our Commandante."

"I understand that. Yes."

"And that was why poor Basilio"—there was a glint in Juvenal's eyes as he said it—"had to walk so circumspectly. Indeed, it was a narrow and thorny path he trod with bare feet. A path which led through torment to destruction."

"At the hands of whom?"

The walls of the Academy were so thick, the silence was so complete, that they might have been isolated in a capsule in space.

"It is not difficult to guess," said Juvenal at last. The words seemed to be forced out of him by an inner pressure that he was unable to resist. "If not by General Ramirez himself, then by his creatures. The Military Police. It would need only the slightest pretext—"

"Such as—"

"A hint from above that Basilio was engaged in treasonable activities. Rigorous questioning. Then a faked suicide to conceal the truth."

"And you do not think that Captain Hernandez had anything to do with it?"

Juvenal laughed. It was a sudden, harsh bray of laughter. "Hernandez? Of course not. He is a martinet, a disciplinarian certainly. But not a sadist. Besides, though he might conceivably have beaten him, how could he, single-handed, have arranged the so-called suicide?"

"No doubt the prosecution will have a theory, and witnesses to support it."

"Certainly they will have witnesses. All of them will be Villagra's policemen. They will tell a most convincing story. One of them will have seen Basilio going to Captain Hernandez's room. Another will have heard screams. A third will have noticed Captain Hernandez driving his car in the direction of the pavilion. After all, they have two successful precedents. Why should they not follow them? You have read the accounts of the Ruffi and Perez cases."

"Yes," said the Lieutenant

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"I have read the accounts."

He left Juvenal Valdez's room a badly disturbed man. He was pondering deeply on what he had learned. He was still pondering when he realized that he was being followed.

It was the tink of a steel-capped boot against stone. He swung round, but could see nothing. Or was there a darker shadow in the shadows behind the floodlights?

Cardozo hesitated for a moment, then he swung round and started to walk fast across the large open parade ground. He heard nothing. The sound of his own footsteps, crunching on the gravel, effectively blocked out other sounds. It was instinct which made him turn his head. Three men were coming after him and coming fast.

He had a gun, but it was in a shoulder holster, inside his belted topcoat. Before he could reach it his pursuers would be on top of him.

He took to his heels.

The difficulty was that he had no clear idea where the main gate lay. The parade ground stretched out unhelpfully in the darkness.

A building loomed ahead. At the last moment Cardozo realized that it was the sports pavilion, the very one behind which Basilio's body had been found. He had come too far to the right. But it gave him his bearings. He had only to swing left, on the path behind the pavilion, and it would bring him to the main gate and the guardhouse.

As his feet touched the path he realized something else. The men behind him appreciating his blunder, had spread out on both sides and one of them had already reached the path to the Lieutenant's left.

Cardozo changed his plan, stopped in his tracks, and then quickly swung round.

The man behind him was so close, and coming so fast, that he could not conform to the move. As he went past, Cardozo thrust out a foot and saw his pursuer go sprawling. Then the Lieutenant was racing for the pavilion.

The third man, who had moved out to the right, was waiting for him in the shadow of the building, crouched low, his head forward, his arms hanging. A professional fighter.

Cardozo ran straight at him. Then, at the very last moment, he swerved to one side and sprinted up the pavilion steps.

At the top of the steps there was a broad railing. He put one hand on it, vaulted it, and landed, in the comfortable darkness, among a pile of benches.

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But he had gained the time he needed.

As the dark shape of his pursuer loomed at the foot of the steps Cardozo fired once, aiming carefully above the pursuer's head. The crack of the shot split open the quietness of the night.

The Lieutenant smiled happily. He had his back to a solid building. He had seven more shots in his police automatic, and a spare magazine in his pocket. He was quite prepared, if necessary, to wait for daylight.

It did not prove necessary. Five minutes later Sergeant Torrero, who had come with the picquet to investigate the sound of the shot, accompanied him back to the main gate.

At the Seguridad Building he found Colonel Ocampos, still engrossed in his study of the red-covered exercise book. He had just deciphered another name in it. It was in pencil scribble on the inside of the cover, so faint that it looked as though someone had written it and then changed his mind and tried to erase it. At first sight it had looked like *Gonzalez*. But careful work with a magnifying glass, under oblique light, had clarified the first few letters. It was *Benitez*. And the letter in front of it was a capital *A*.

"Andrea Benitez," said Ocampos. He said it aloud as Lieutenant Cardozo came into the room. The discovery had excited him. It excited him more than the Lieutenant's story, which seemed only to amuse him.

"They chased you out, did they?" he said. "It was to be expected. They're very sensitive about poaching on their preserves."

"It wasn't at all funny," said Cardozo. "Or it wouldn't have been, if they'd caught me."

"You should wear your gun where you can always get at it," said Ocampos unsympathetically. "Now, to something important. Andrea Benitez. We have a file on him. A silly little man who tried to stir up trouble in the University. He cooled his heels in prison for a few months last year. He's free now. He lives in an apartment house near the airport. The address is in the file. Bring him in."

"Tonight?"

Ocampos looked at his watch. It was five minutes to midnight.

"Well, first thing tomorrow," he said grudgingly.

After breakfast on the following day Cadet Under-Officer Juvenal Valdez obtained permission to leave the Academy and drove his neat and inconspicuous American car to

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the private parking lot at the back of the Chancellery Building. He left it in charge of the one-armed parking attendant, then walked through the private entrance, where the door was held open for him by a doorman who had lost most of his face. He then took the elevator which went only to the sixth floor, and was operated by a man who perched all day on a stool, because he had only half a leg. All three men were veterans of the War of Liberation and owed their jobs to this fact.

Juvenal entered an unmarked door at the end of the corridor.

General Rafael Valdez, Chancellor, Minister of Defense, and Leader of his country, was not, at first sight, an impressive figure. He was six inches shorter than his son, a lack of height emphasized by a stoop which brought his shoulders forward and revealed the top of his head with its yellowish skin and thinning hair. For some years now he had abandoned the habit of wearing a uniform, and although the suit which he wore had been cut in London, and fitted him accordingly, it was hardly the expected garb of a South American dictator.

Yet he was formidable. In spite of the grayness and neutrality of his appearance he seemed to sound a warning. Partly it was in his eyes, partly in the way he held himself. Some of it was in his voice when he spoke.

He greeted his son formally. They shook hands. They settled themselves at a table, in the big bay window, the son holding the chair for his father to be seated before sitting himself.

"Well?" said Valdez.

"I wish that all *were* well, but it is not," said Juvenal.

He continued for some minutes. Then his father said, speaking slowly and dispassionately, as a judge might have done if he were summing up a case which interested but did not really concern him, "So. Your thesis is that my old friend and comrade in arms, General Ramirez, is plotting against me. That he is in touch with that other old comrade of mine, General Sirtola, now a resident out of the country. The plotters, you suggest, come chiefly from the establishment of the Military District Police, under Colonel Villagra—I cannot, for the moment, recall him."

"You would not know him. Until recently he was only a Captain. He has been promoted rapidly by General Ramirez."

"Villagra. But yes. I do remember a man of that name. Large, red-faced, and with

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somewhat prominent side teeth—tusks, almost."

Juvenal smiled. "Your memory for faces is infallible."

"And you tell me that these plotters have tried to involve you?"

"More than simply involve me," said Juvenal indifferently. "They wished me to lead the coup. I was to take your place as head of the State. I should, of course, have been a puppet only."

"And that was why you refused?"

"I admit an ambition to succeed you," said Juvenal with a smile. "But not to replace you."

"I wonder if you are wise," said Valdez. "It is a position with few attractions and many headaches. Was the approach made to you direct?"

"No. They used this boy, Basilio, as a go-between. They knew that he was a friend of mine. Possibly, since his father is of the Febrerista party, they considered that he might be on their side. If so, they misjudged him."

"And having taken him too far into their confidence, and found him loyal to me, they first flogged him, and then hanged him."

"Yes."

"One might conclude, perhaps, that they made similar approaches—and similar mistakes—with the other two cadets, Ruffio and Perez."

"I think that is a fair assumption."

"But you have no proof of it?"

"I have no proof at all."

"Then what do you suggest that we can do?"

Juvenal looked at his father. There were times when he understood him and liked him, other times when he did not understand him and feared him.

He said, "If you do nothing, you realize that this conspiracy may grow?"

"A fish should not be caught until it has attained a certain size."

"You realize too that injustice will be done? That an innocent man will be condemned and shot?"

"Captain Hernandez?"

"Yes."

"Thin, dark, with a rather large dark mustache?"

"That's the man."

"And you are certain that he had no hand in this boy's death?"

"Oh, quite certain."

Juvenal said this with such emphasis that his father looked up for a fleeting second, seeing in the big proud young man a startling reflection of the passionate girl he had married twenty-five years before.

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Juvenal became conscious of his father's gaze. He shifted uncomfortably and repeated, "Quite certain. It would be entirely out of character."

"Are you telling me all this for my own protection? Or because you respect Captain Hernandez and wish to prevent an injustice? Or because you were fond of Basilio and desire to avenge his death?"

"Something of all three."

"Yes. I see."

His father got up, stepped to the window, and stood staring down at the traffic crawling round the Piazza. He stood so for a long time in silence. Then he said, "When no truly effective course of action suggests itself, it is better to do nothing. Sometimes a small injustice will result. Sometimes something will happen to prevent it."

Juvenal realized that the interview was over, and departed the way he had come.

After he had driven off, the legless elevator operator said to the faceless doorman, "He has his father's temper."

That was on Friday.

The military tribunal to try Captain Hernandez was convoked for the following Wednesday. On the intervening Sunday, Father Domenico Santos, Superior of the Jesuit Order of Our Lady at Quyguyho, preached in the Cathedral Church of the Asuncion.

What he said was reported, under banner headlines in every newspaper in the capital, for Father Santos was a nationally respected figure, a man of iron integrity and proved courage.

"If the trial of Captain Hernandez proceeds," he was reported as saying, "for a crime of which his accusers well know that he is innocent, I shall deem it my duty to offer evidence at the hearing. To do so will involve breaking the sacred seal of the confessional. But in order to prevent injustice and save an innocent life I should not hesitate to do even that."

The newspapers then pointed out that Basilio's family came from the neighborhood of Quyquyho, and that it was reasonable to assume that Father Santos had been the dead boy's confessor.

So great was the excitement over this unexpected development that a number of lesser occurrences escaped notice. A retired Major living alone took his dog for a walk that Sunday night. The dog returned, but the Major did not. On Monday morning a junior official in the Ministry of the Interior failed to arrive at his office; and an employee at the airport, a man named Andrea Benitez, did not report for duty.

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To Lieutenant Cardozo and the other members of his staff who had carried out these three arrests it appeared that Colonel Ocampos had taken root in the Seguridad Building. He had a bed in his office, and his meals were brought in to him. His only excursions into the open air were a walk to the tobacconist's shop on the corner, where he purchased every day a fresh box of cigars.

On Tuesday morning he left his office and paid a visit to the lower part of the building. Here were the cells in which prisoners were kept in temporary confinement for interrogation, before they were passed on to permanent establishments. Here also were certain interview rooms, soundproofed, with concrete floors and tiled walls. The interrogation of Andrea Benitez was starting as he arrived.

At the end of it he said to the Sergeant in charge, "Show him the photographs of the last man who was obstinate. I should like him to see particularly the photographs of his back. Give him plenty of time to study them. I will be down again in an hour."

When he got back to his office there was a message that Father Santos had arrived. He said, "Show him in at once," and lit a cigar.

The Jesuit was six-foot tall and his robes hung down over a body that was as thin as a sword. His lips were indrawn and bloodless, his face carved out of yellowing stone. He refused the offer of a chair and remained standing. The light from the window threw his menacing shadow across the room.

"I come here under compulsion," he said.

"Then those who brought you shall be reprimanded Father. My instructions were that you be invited to attend."

"When an armed policeman invites you it is an order. Now that you have me here, what do you intend to do to me Subject me to your special interrogation techniques?"

"That would hardly be profitable, I imagine."

The thin lips cracked into a bitter smile. "Under the old regime, when I was tortured, it is true that I was not broken But I am an older man now Old men are less tolerant of pain. If you were to whip me hard enough, you might whip few words out of me."

"The question does not arise," said Ocampos. "I repeat Father, that you are here by invitation. I desire your help. If you do not choose to give you are free to depart."

"What do you wish of me?

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"I want you to tell me, now, what you would tell the military tribunal were you to give evidence before it."

"With what object?"

"My object, curiously enough, is the same as yours. To prevent injustice. Indeed, if the truth is what I suspect it to be, there can be no injustice. Because there will be no trial."

The flint-colored eyes held the Colonel's deep brown ones for a full ten seconds. Then Father Santos said, "If you promise me that, Colonel, then this would seem to be one occasion on which the Church and the State can act together."

At half-past two on that same Tuesday afternoon Cristobal Ocampos rose from his chair. He had already donned the service uniform of a Colonel in the Presidential Guard. Now, opening the closet, he took the dress overcoat from its hanger, and put it on, draping it carefully to conceal the bulge made by the big revolver in its holster on his left hip.

He examined himself critically in the glass. There was no doubt about it. The coat had become too tight around the waist. It would have to be let out. To Lieutenant Cardozo, also in uniform, he said, "I think everything will be ready for us now."

The two men left by the entrance at the rear of the building. The courtyard was crammed with soldiers. There were four troop carriers, each with a full complement of steel-helmeted infantry men; a section of armored cars with machine guns mounted fore and aft; a dozen motorcyclists; and an open olive-green command car with a soldier at the wheel and another beside him.

Ocampos and Cardozo got into the command car which moved slowly out of the courtyard and into the street. Behind them they could hear the roar of the other vehicles starting up.

Colonel Villagra was in his office in the headquarters of the Military District Police when the head of the cavalcade arrived. He looked out of the window and saw the soldiers jumping from the carriers and running to surround the building, saw the machine guns being set up and the armored cars moving to strategic points. He was still standing, staring out, when Colonel Ocampos came into the room.

Villagra said, "Might I ask what this—this charade—means?"

Files of soldiers were already moving through the building, bringing out policemen and disarming them. There was no

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resistance. The demonstration of overwhelming force had been sufficient.

Ocampos said, "Your gun, please."

Villagra unbuckled his belt without a word. His red face was a mottled gray, and his plump cheeks seemed to have caved in.

Ocampos said, "You are under arrest."

"Is it permitted to know the charge?"

"The charge is conspiring against our Leader, the object of the conspiracy being to bring back the traitor, Sinola, from his well-merited exile."

"I take it that you have some evidence to support this charge?"

"Two of your agents have made full confessions."

(Of the three, only the retired and solitary Major had refused to speak. His body had been buried early that morning behind the Seguridad Building.)

"I have no doubt," said Colonel Villagra, attempting a sneer which lifted his lip and exposed his tusklike side teeth, "that you can produce perjured testimony against me."

"You speak as an expert," said Ocampos. He turned to Lieutenant Cardozo and said, "It would be more fitting, I think, if we continued this conversation alone."

As he spoke he was unbuckling the holster strap on Colonel Villagra's belt, and now he held Villagra's automatic pistol loosely in his gloved right hand.

Lieutenant Cardozo turned on his heel and went quickly out, shutting the door behind him.

He had got halfway down the passage when he heard the shot. He did not even turn his head.

That evening Colonel Ocampos called on his Leader—not at the Chancellery but at his villa in the foothills above the city. The nights were cold at that time of year, and the two men sat in deep leather armchairs in front of a snapping fire.

It was the Leader who broke a long silence.

"After Colonel Villagra, by shooting himself, had admitted his treachery," he said "what did you do?"

"I placed his principal officers under arrest and then spoke to the men. I felt no doubt that they were innocent dupes. I considered that it was sufficient to disarm them and send each man home, with orders to stay there. We will, of course, examine their records. If any of them appear unreliable he will be dismissed.

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"And the officers?"

"The decision must be yours," said Ocampos. "We could treat them in the same way as the men, or we could stage a mass trial."

"I dislike propaganda trials. They usually backfire."

"They harm our public image," agreed Ocampos, "and achieve little."

"Was it while you were making these arrangements, Colonel, that General Ramirez escaped?"

"That is so."

"The Academy is some little way from the Military Police Headquarters. Your preparations were made in strict secrecy. How did he get the news in time, I wonder?"

Ocampos considered his reply. He had worked with the Leader for a decade, and had been his friend before the Leader came to power. But there was a saying that blood was thicker than water. He realized that he would be taking a considerable risk if he spoke now. And for what?

The silence must have lasted a long time, because it was broken by the Leader who said, "I asked you a question, Colonel."

"Yes," said Ocampos, "and I will answer it. General Ramirez escaped because I sent him word. I sent it by Sergeant Torrero. He is one of my men. I placed him at the Academy some time ago, to watch over events."

"Let us forget Sergeant Torrero, who is no doubt an honest policeman, and find out why you, the head of my Security Police, should have taken such a step."

"If General Ramirez had not fled, it would have been necessary to bring him to trial and to execute him. He would have been more dangerous to us as a martyr than he will be as a pensioner of one of our neighboring countries. As a student of English history, I have often thought that the Jacobite cause would have been greatly strengthened had the Young Pretender been executed on Tower Hill. It withered away as its hero grew fat, debauched, and ludicrous in the French Court."

"Even supposing you are right, was not this a matter of policy, which I should have been asked to decide for myself? Do such matters come within the province of the Security Police?"

"In the ordinary way," said Ocampos, "they would certainly not do so. But there was a further aspect of this matter. At his trial, if there was a trial, one of the matters General Ramirez would have been accused of

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would have been the death of three cadets under his charge as the Commandante. As to that, certain facts are now much clearer. All three, Perez, Ruffio, and Basilio de Casal, had become involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in the treacherous schemes of the General and his immediate circle. In the case of the first two, the cadets had been indiscreet, or perhaps had shown an inclination to defect. So they were eliminated. The case of Basilio de Casal was somewhat different."

"Different? How?"

"Father Santos, who was the boy's confessor, has told me some odd facts about him—facts which seemed to me, in the context of other evidence which I had, to be significant. Basilio had read deeply in the lives of the Saints, particularly the ones who practised extreme forms of self-mortification. He had a white robe, and whenever he convicted himself, before the tribunal of his own conscience, of some sin or peccadillo, he would dress himself in this garment, and kneel, silent and motionless, in the attitude of a penitent."

"Father Santos told you this?"

"This, and more. Basilio was, it appears, a student of the works of Count von Sacher-Masoch. This book was found in his room—it is the Count's best-known work."

He took from his pocket the tattered volume of the *Galiziche Geschichten* and handed it to the Leader who placed it on the arm of his chair without opening it, and said, "This Count. He was the man who originated the cult of masochism, was he not? The idea that you could obtain sexual satisfaction from the infliction of pain on yourself."

"Spiritual satisfaction also, in certain cases. He makes that plain in his writings."

"And are you suggesting that when Basilio found himself helplessly enmeshed in treachery, he sentenced himself to death by hanging? And carried out the sentence himself?"

"Not only to death. For a nature like this, a quick and simple death would have been entirely inadequate to the crimes he felt he had committed. It was necessary that he suffer first."

"He could not have flogged himself, surely?"

"No."

"Then who did it? General Ramirez? Colonel Villagra and his policemen? Captain Hernandez?"

"None of those appear to me to be at all likely," said Ocampos. He was picking his words with great care. "As I

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understand the cult of masochism, it is an essential element that the pain be inflicted by a friend. A close friend. One for whom the sufferer has a warm and reciprocated affection. Almost, one might say, one with whom he was in love."

He was thinking, as he spoke, of the photograph of a big handsome young man with an arrogant beak of a nose and rather full lips, dressed in riding clothes, with a riding switch tucked under one arm.

What the Leader was thinking was not apparent.

When he broke the long silence he said, in a toneless voice, "One gets these relationships between young men who are thrown together. They are inevitable, I imagine."

"Inevitable," said Ocampos. "And usually, they are quite transient."

A log fell from the fire blazing brightly. The Leader leaned forward, picked it up with his bare fingers, and threw it back into the flames. He said, "If there is no trial, then there will be no occasion for Father Santos to give evidence?"

"None at all."

"And you would advise that course?"

"I would advise it."

"I accept your advice," said the Leader. And as Ocampos rose to go, the Leader added, "Thank you, Colonel."

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à la BLACK MASK

The contract, the hit, was going too slow. So the Organization sent Shelby—to be the toe of the shoe. But every shoe has a heel . . .

BAD SPOT

by DANTE STIRPE

SHELBY LOWERED THE binoculars and turned to call down at me from the crest of the hill. "If you'd been smart enough to bring a rifle, you could have had one of them right now. The girl."

The weeds I was lying in whispered to each other as I rolled and twisted my head up to get a better look at him. I had to see if he was kidding. But he wasn't. For such a young, fresh-faced guy he was very intense. Right now he was giving me his darkest scowl.

"Shelby," I said, "the range is almost four hundred yards, and the wind is gusting and changing direction every six seconds. Are you nuts?"

His mouth tightened with anger. "No, I ain't nuts. I thought you were supposed to be good, one of the best."

"I am good, dammit," I said, getting mad, myself. The organization had sent him down two days ago, and Shelby had spent them riding me and giving helpful advice I didn't need. "But I'm not that good. Even if I knew what the wind was doing here, I don't know what it's doing there. And nobody's that good. A hit would be pure luck. Anyway, use your head. You want both of them. If you got only one, the other one'd hide and we could sit around for months waiting for a crack at him."

It made sense but he was beyond any sense. He was frustrated and mad because the job wasn't going quick enough.

He said, "That's what you're good at, all right. Sitting around, waiting. Jock was right in sending me down. 'He's been there over a week,' Jock said. 'Be the toe of the shoe. Go down and pry things loose. Maybe he's stuck to his chair.'

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And he was right. All you do is lay around on this hill a quarter mile away and watch the house. I don't know why he hired an independent, anyway." He turned his head and spat, letting me know what he thought of independents. "We got plenty of good boys of our own."

My face was hot and my neck tight, but I tried to be patient. "Jock hired me because I'm better than his boys and he knows it. And if he wanted it done sooner, he should have started sooner. It's a tougher assignment than he thought."

"Too tough for you, huh? Maybe that's why Jock sent me down."

I shrugged. Talking to him was like talking to a TV set. He turned away and inched up the hill on his elbows to have another look through the glasses. All he'd see was a narrow lane, and across the lane, a sprawling frame-and-brick house in the middle of a few acres of walled yard. He'd seen it before. Maybe he thought that if he looked at it long enough, he'd see some way in.

I broke off a long blade of grass and began chewing on it, then I rolled on my back and watched a few puffy clouds chasing across the sky. The sun was on its way down and the wind felt colder. Another day almost gone. And still the job wasn't done.

But it *was* a tough assignment. I had to get two, not one. And the only place they were together was in the house.

Shelby slid down to me. One thing he didn't have was patience. He hadn't been up there more than a few minutes. His black eyes brightened with anger when he saw me lying there, chewing on a blade of grass.

"See anything different?" I asked.

He shook his head. "All quiet."

"Let's go eat, huh?"

He sneered. "Of course. You been working so hard today."

I sat up quickly and almost let him have one in the teeth. But I saw that was stupid, so instead I blew out the grass blade and glared at him. He was just frustrated and too young to know that sometimes you wait.

"We're coming back tonight," he announced, like a high priest.

I stared at him. "It'll be cold."

"Tough. Wear your longies. We're coming back."

"Why? It'll only be more boring than in daytime."

"To see what we see, that's why. Jock wants this done right away. Or weren't you listening? We'll see if there's a way in."

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"They've got dogs."

"Dogs?"

"Two of them. Dobermans. The kennels are behind the house. You can't see 'em from here. They patrol after dark."

He was staring at me now. "So you been up here at night."

"Sure. Twice. I told you, I do my job. Or weren't you listening?"

He flashed me a smile, a nice one, and I almost began to like him. But not quite.

"Okay. Going in during the day is out. Guards, people coming and going, and there might be a lot of shooting. His neighbors couldn't ignore it."

I nodded.

"So we go in at night. Which means we watch the place at night. See what their routine is. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "But frankly, this job needs an army."

We walked down the hill and through a grove of trees to a dirt road, where our cars were parked. Shelby volunteered to take the first watch, which was fine. I could sleep till almost midnight when I'd relieve him. He drove to his motel and I drove to my apartment. We never showed together in public.

After dinner I went to bed but instead of sleeping I spent the next few hours worrying. He was a pain, but young and eager, and he'd probably do something stupid. Like go down to the gate or check out the wall, though I'd warned him not to.

By eleven o'clock I couldn't stand it any more, so I dressed quickly and drove out there. The house was south of town, outside the city limits, and it took twenty minutes to get there. Which made me a half hour early. And because I didn't want Shelby thinking I was worried about him, I decided to kill the time by driving along the narrow lane that went past the house. It connected with a state road at the other end. I'd turn north on that and find the dirt road where we'd parked our cars earlier in the day. Then I'd hunt up Shelby.

A few seconds later I came around the last curve before the gate and my stomach dropped. Three men and a woman were silhouetted in the lights of a car that blocked the road. The woman was standing a little apart from the men, watching them, and the men appeared to be fighting. But when I got closer I saw that one man was beating Shelby with a club while another held him up.

He'd done something stupid, all right. And they'd caught him at it. I couldn't think of anybody who deserved a

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beating more, but I was hoping that he had the sense to do some good straight lying.

When the girl noticed my lights she gave a yell and dashed for the front of my car, waving at me. The way their car was skewed across the road I couldn't get by even if I ran her down. So I stopped, hoping to bluff my way out any way I could. The two men let Shelby drop and came running up, one on each side, and jerked open my car doors.

The club turned out to be a sap, finished in black leather, and the guy who swung it was a dark square-faced number with mean eyes and sweat on his face.

He was closest, so I said, "Get that car out of the way. Let me by."

"Out," he said, pointing with the sap.

I shook my head. "Let me by. I don't want—"

He let me have a quick one-two, the first on the ribs and the second on the upper thigh, and suddenly I was hanging on the steering wheel, gasping for air and fighting down a scream rising against the pain.

It was a few minutes before I was breathing right again, and when I turned my head the girl was sliding into the seat beside me. She was a slender girl, smaller than she'd looked framed in the headlights. Wearing a leopard coat, stockings, and deadly-looking black high-heeled shoes. Her large mouth dwarfed her small face, and her dark eyes had a hot, intense look, as if she'd been watching lions feeding on Christians. And enjoying it.

She was nice enough to wait while the worst of the pain went away, then she said, "What are you doing up here?"

"Nothing. Just riding around."

She peered at me a long minute, probably deciding that a man who went riding alone at night was either nuts or senile. I didn't look either.

"Let's see your driver's license."

"Why? You a cop?"

"No, but I wouldn't argue about it if I were you. Let's see it."

I dug out the license and handed it to her. She examined it carefully, moving her lips silently as she read it.

As she passed it back she said, "You live in town here, Mr. Jordan?"

"Yes. Just moved a week ago."

She pointed at the license. "Then you'd better get one for this state."

"Oh. Yes. Thanks for reminding me. I'll do it Monday."

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I made a show of looking at Shelby, lying in the ditch. "It seems you're having a private fight here, and I don't want—"

"And this is a private road, Mr. Jordan," she interrupted.

"It is?"

"Yes. There's a sign back there, saying so."

"I'm sorry. I guess I didn't notice it."

"It's a big sign. Hard to miss." Her dark eyes bored into me.

I shrugged. "But I did. I'm sorry."

"Uh-huh."

She didn't buy it. She waved a hand at Mean Eyes and he crawled in back with his sap. Then she told the other one to move the car and make sure Shelby didn't go anywhere. They still wanted to talk to him.

So they knew his name. I wondered how much more they knew.

"We're going up to the house, Mr. Jordan. I want you to talk to Daddy."

"Daddy? Why?"

"Because it's inconvenient for him to come here and talk. He's in a wheel chair."

As we passed the gate and went up the drive she said, "Daddy is Jerry 'The Boxer' Munso. Heard the name, Mr. Jordan?"

She watched me carefully, looking for a reaction. I shook my head. "No, I don't think so."

"And my name's Carol."

Keeping it light, I said with a nervous laugh, "Under the circumstances I'm not sure I'm happy to meet you."

She laughed, too, but as if she had other things on her mind, just as I did. When I stopped the car she motioned me out and we climbed four steps to a massive, iron-bound front door that would have given trouble to the Third Army. She turned a key and we went in. Mean Eyes followed.

"This way," she said, as she led us down a hall to the living room.

When we entered, Jerry Munso jerked his chair around and his eyes fastened onto me like hooks. He had the small evil-looking eyes of a snake. Set in a big round head with full puffy cheeks and meaty lips. He was almost completely bald and whatever muscle he'd had as a boxer had gone to fat. Rolls of it, under his chin, around his neck, and around his belly.

"Everything okay, Carol?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Kind of. Shelby won't say much. The boys were softening him up when our friend here comes along. Roger Jordan, Daddy Munso."

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"Hello, Mr. Munso."

He gave me a curt nod.

"He says he didn't notice the 'Private Road' sign," Carol went on. "I couldn't think of anything else to do with him, so I brought him here. Frankly, I think his act is as phony as a three-dollar bill. He ain't yelling enough."

I jerked a thumb at Mean Eyes, standing behind me. "If you remember, he stopped my yelling."

"Search him," Jerry Munso said.

"Now, look—"

"You want it hard or easy, Jordan?"

I shrugged and stood still for the search. Mean Eyes did a thorough job but he didn't find anything that would interest the Munsos. I wasn't that stupid.

Jerry Munso stared at me coldly as I put things back in my pockets.

"You see what happened to that guy down by the gate?"

"What guy? What gate? I forget."

One corner of his mouth turned back in a thin smile. "You're sharp. Make sure you stay sharp or you'll get worse than him, maybe lots worse. No cops."

I shook my head. "Cops and me don't get along at all."

He squinted his beady eyes at me. "You got a record?"

"Yeah. On the coast. One of the reasons I moved away."

I didn't say which coast and he didn't ask. Which was fine with me. It'd take him that much longer to check my story. And I was pretty sure he would.

"Okay. Beat it." He turned to Carol. "Check out Shelby. All the way."

I gave Carol and Mean Eyes a lift back to the gate. I didn't spot the dogs, but I wasn't surprised. If they were trained right you wouldn't see them till it was too late.

At the gate I stopped to let out my passengers. Neither said a word. I'd been cleared by the boss and they had other things on their minds. As I turned and drove away, I saw Shelby, on his hands and knees in the shallow ditch. I left him to them, praying that he had the strength to keep me out of his lies.

When I got to my apartment I took a hot bath to get rid of the soreness, but it didn't do much good. And between chewing over my assignment and seeing over and over again that sap crashing against Shelby's jaw in the harsh glare of headlights, I didn't get much sleep, either.

The next morning I limped around, getting dressed and arguing with myself about

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calling Jock and telling him about Shelby. Finally I decided not to. Shelby belonged to the organization, and if they couldn't take care of him, tough. He wasn't my problem.

Over breakfast I tried figuring how to use my slight in with the Munsos to get them together again, when I'd be ready. I couldn't come up with anything that made sense.

Later in the morning I was having my third cup of coffee and watching a light rain fall when the door buzzer went off. Carol Munso stood in the hall, hugging a raincoat around her chin, her brown hair sparkling with raindrops. She nodded at me and walked in.

After a short look around she shook her head and said, "A dump."

Her being here could only mean bad news. I wondered how bad.

"Mind your manners," I said.

She turned and gazed at me with wide dark eyes. "So you work at the G&G car lot."

"Uh-huh." I'd made sure Jock had set up a cover for me.

"We're checking on you, you see."

"Should I act surprised? And if you're going to be here a while, let me take your coat."

She shook her head slowly, staring at me closely. "You see the papers or hear the radio?"

"No. I hear enough bad news without doing either."

"Shelby's dead."

I pulled out a chair and sat down, pretty casually, I thought, for things were sure going to hell.

"That'd be the fellow from last night."

"Yes."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"He didn't just die."

"I didn't think he had. So what?"

"We found his car on a dirt road west of the house. There was a gun in it."

"So you shot him?"

"No, that was later. The boys took him to his motel. To search his room. They found a message from an organization in Chicago. They've been trying to take over the rackets here."

"Which you and your Daddy run."

"Yes. The boys thought he had passed out—Shelby, I mean. Instead he crawls off the bed and starts yelling and pounding on the walls, to attract attention. They shot him and ran."

"All very interesting. I'm sure. But what are you telling me for?"

She was still staring at me. "Daddy wants to see you. Right away."

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I didn't argue with her. I picked up my raincoat and we left.

Jerry Munso said, "You knew about Shelby?"

The three of us were seated around the living room. And no sign of Mean Eyes. All in all they were treating me pretty nicely. There had to be a hook somewhere.

"No. She told me."

He nodded. "Okay. It's done. Too bad it was so messy, with cops and everything. We were gonna have to kill him anyway, only quiet." He paused a second. "You're in a bad spot, Jordan. The only connection between him and us."

"I told you last night, I forgot everything."

"Last night we thought we were beating up a stupid prowler, to teach him a lesson. Last night he wasn't dead. This morning's different. I gotta have more than your word you'll forget."

"I see," I said slowly. "What do you want?"

"I gotta have a hold on you. Something solid."

"Something incriminating," Carol put in.

"Yeah, right. Incriminating. Something I can send you back to jail for. Understand?"

"I'm beginning to. You want to recruit me."

He shook his head. "Nothing steady. Just a job now and then." He smiled. "You'll be my sleeper."

I pretended to consider his offer. Then I said, "I don't see much choice. Either that or you get rid of me, only quiet."

His smile widened. "Right. I knew you weren't stupid."

"I suppose I start right away."

"Jordan, you're a mind reader. Tomorrow night. Be here at nine sharp. You're gonna make a delivery and a pickup for me."

"What kind of delivery and pickup?"

"You deliver money and you pick up a box of junk."

I whistled, showing interest. "A lot? Just a little? How big a box?"

He framed a box in the air with his hands. "About the size of a cigar box, maybe a little bigger. Wrapped and taped. Why?"

"I want to make sure I get the right package."

"You'll get the right package. I've done business with 'em before. They're reliable."

"So you say. But if they decide not to be reliable I don't want you blaming me for it."

He stared at me. "You're the one I'll blame, all right. Don't fool with that package. Just deliver it here."

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I shrugged and stood up. "It's your party."

"And don't forget it." His polite veneer had peeled off. "Be here tomorrow, nine o'clock. I'll tell you where to go. The whole operation shouldn't take more than an hour."

"I'll be here."

Carol saw me out. I didn't have anything to say to her.

I spent an hour driving and walking around town, sightseeing. And looking for a tail. When I was sure I didn't have one I drove to the south side to see an old man who ran a toy shop. He fussed over my dropping in on Sunday, but I shut him up finally and told him what I wanted. He jerked his head up and down a few times.

"And no slips," I said.

He was shorter than me but he managed to look down his nose at me.

"I never slip."

At 5:30 the next afternoon I stopped by at the toy shop to collect what I'd ordered from the old man. I put it in the trunk, had dinner, and at 9:00 I was in Jerry Munso's living room again. Carol and Mean Eyes were there, too.

I was sitting in a low-slung stuffed chair with a package on my lap. The package was about the size of a box of shirts, wrapped in brown paper, and taped with two-inch masking tape. Jerry Munso wheeled his chair over and handed me a sheet of paper with a paragraph of typing on it.

"Sign it."

I read it first. "It says here I'm receiving two hundred dollars for this pickup."

"So it says. But try and get it."

I shrugged and signed. He frowned over the signature.

"This signature could be anybody's."

"But it happens to be mine," I said. "Where do I go?"

It turned out to be in an alley off Delaney Street, number 13½ and up two flights to apartment 2C. The alley and the two flights were almost pitch-black. A good place for an ambush. My mouth was dry and my chest tight as I felt my way up the stairs. Maybe Munso didn't have a package to be picked up. Just a delivery. And the end of the line for me.

The second-floor hall was weakly lit and I had to practically grope my way along it. I found 2C halfway down and knocked. The door opened immediately, just enough to show an eye and part of a mouth.

"Jordan?"

I nodded. The door opened a

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few more inches and I slipped inside. The man inside shut and locked the door, then put a gun against my spine.

"Take two steps."

I took two steps. Across the room another weak bulb lit up a card table and a couple of chairs. I didn't see anything else except a bare wall.

Suddenly a shadow formed on my right, then disappeared. My package went with it. I turned my head that way and the man pushed the gun harder into my back.

"Eyes front, Jordan. We don't know you. Don't know you at all."

In a few minutes the shadow reappeared and I had another package. Smaller this time, lighter. The right size for my purpose.

The man with the gun said, "Beat it."

I beat it. Three blocks away I stopped the car and mopped my hands and face.

It was 9:40 when I turned up the drive to Jerry Munso's house. I took the package from the trunk and went up the steps.

The three of them were waiting in the hall. Carol's eyes shone expectantly, and it occurred to me she might be on the stuff, herself. I handed her the package.

"Merry Christmas."

She tossed her head.

I shrugged and watched her slide a fingernail under a flap of tape. Jerry Munso snatched the package away.

"Not here. We'll open it in the study." He cocked his head at me and said to Mean Eyes. "Keep him here till we check it over."

I watched them go down the hall and disappear around a corner. A few seconds later there was the solid thud of a door closing. I turned to Mean Eyes.

"How about a drink, huh?"

He shrugged and I kicked him in the crotch. As he bent over I rabbit-punched him viciously. He went down on the thick carpet with hardly a sound. And stayed down. I opened and closed the front door silently and ran to my car, worrying about the dogs.

As I drove away from the house I took a .38 out of the glove box and put it on the seat beside me. I reached the gate before the rear end of the house blew up. The crack of the explosion bounced off the surrounding hills and rumbled back on itself like a roll of thunder.

Then I saw the dogs. Huge and deadly in the shadowy light, their mouths open and tongues hanging. Their trainer, a short squat guy, walked

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behind them holding chain leashes.

I rolled down the window and showed him my gun. "Open the gate."

He stood there, looking from me to the house. I could smell it burning. And hear it.

"What happened?" he asked, stalling.

I was in no mood for talk. I took careful aim and shot the nearest dog. It reared and flopped on the ground.

"I've got plenty of bullets," I said. "Open the gate."

He opened it and I drove through.

Ten minutes later, as I was carefully making my way back to my apartment, I heard the first siren. And then another. Soon there was a whole symphony.

The box of junk in the back was a complication, and finally I stopped long enough to bury it under some brush in a small woods. Then to my apartment for two bags I'd packed earlier. At the airport I turned in the rental car and in the Men's Room I got rid of all my Jordan identification. Then I found a phone booth.

I heard the receiver lifted. "Yeah?"

"Fergus here," I said. "Jock around?"

A few muffled noises, then Jock came on. "Done?"

"Yes," I said.

"Both?"

"Both."

He chuckled. "I'll send some boys down tonight. To take over."

"I'm cutting out now," I said.

"Right. Shelby, too."

I'd forgotten he didn't know. "Shelby bought it."

"What?" he yelled.

I swallowed hard. "Shelby bought it. He's dead."

"Damn, oh, damn," he moaned, "what am I gonna do? He was my nephew, my sister's boy."

My stomach coiled like a wounded snake and suddenly I sweated icicles.

"What do I tell her?" he moaned. "What do I tell her?"

I couldn't help him. I had my own worries.

His voice hardened. "Get up here. Right away. The next flight. We'll be waiting."

They'd wait a long time. I counted my money. Five hundred dollars. Not enough. I needed a new identity, a passport, and they came high. Go back and dig up the junk. Sell it.

Hurry. They're after you now.

"Q"

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Another lighthearted, chuckling escapade from the author of "The Little Old Lady from Cricket Creek" and "The Caper in Heather's Revenge" . . . Now meet our two heroes in as zany a zingding as ever hit Smith City . . .

ADVENTURES OF HERBIE AND BIG SAL

by LEN GRAY

FRIDAY BEGAN JUST ducky. For one thing, Big Sal was gone. I got up and checked the motel bathroom, the closets, even under the beds. No Big Sal. My partner was gone.

Worried, I pulled on my pants, opened the door, and stepped outside. I was met by a rainstorm which stopped abruptly, revealing our female motel manager, hose in hand.

"Did I get you?" she called.

I stared at my soaked trousers and cursed.

"Whatzat?" The manager. Tennis-shoed and hard of hearing.

"*Yes!* You got me. See? You got me!"

"Such a shame!"

Without another word I stalked past the woman and went to our car. Just before I got there, Big Sal popped out from behind some bushes. His T-shirt was filthy and leaves nestled in his hair.

"Sal! What the—"

"They got me, Herbie! Yeah, they got me!"

"They?" I asked. "Who?"

"The two kids. Those two rotten little kids and their crummy great Dean."

My head hurt. "What are you talking about, Sal? Start at the beginning. Slowly."

He nodded, stomping from behind the foliage. "It was real early. The little beggars pounded on our door. You was asleep, so I took it. Nice-lookin' kids—said they had candy for sale."

"Go on," I said, not yet understanding.

"So, I says to myself, why not? I like candy. You like candy. Who doesn't like—"

"Stick to the story, Sal!"

"Yeah, sure, Herbie. Well, they said their stuff was outside

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in a cart. So I follow 'em out here and their great Dean—"

"You mean Great Dane?"

"That's the one! This Great Dane named Snuggles comes roarin' out of this bush. Flattens me! Stands on my chest! The kids hit my wallet and then everybody, even the big pooch, hauls me in the shrubs there."

"How old were these kids?"

Big Sal rubbed his head. "Old enough to beat on my head with a stick. It hurts."

I groaned. "Did they get all the money?"

Instead of answering, my partner hung his head.

Fine. Just fine. Our expense money gone and we had a three-day motel bill to pay. I sneezed.

"What's the matter with your pants, Herbie?"

"Never mind. Come on. We've got to get out of here. Now."

Big Sal brightened. "Good thing we're robbin' the bank today, huh, Herbie?"

Not knowing any better at the time, not knowing what was coming, I said, "Uh huh."

We were packed in five minutes.

"Go get the car," I told Sal, "and pull it up to the door. We're leaving—like we did in Santa Barbara."

Sal grinned. He likes getting things for free.

It went all right. It went all right until the moment I was climbing into the driver's seat and Sal said, "Uh oh!"

"What's the matter?"

Instead of an answer I got a poke in my shoulder blades. I turned. Slowly. It was the manager, the one with tennis shoes on her feet and a whistle in her mouth.

She removed the whistle. "Over in 4C is Johnnie Brock. He's one of the local fuzz, fellas. I blow this whistle and John comes trottin' out. You boys wouldn't be leavin' without payin', would you?"

The eyes, gunfighter-gray, said she knew darn tootin' we were getting set to do just that. The whistle moved upward.

"We're short of cash," I admitted.

"Sounds familiar. Well, let's see your trunk."

"How's that?" I said.

"Get your trunk compartment open. See what I want."

I got out of the car. Big Sal followed to see what the old woman had in mind.

What she had in mind was our two suitcases—the two empty leather suitcases we had stashed in the trunk and into which we planned to stash the cash from the Smith City Bank and Trust.

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I hesitated before giving them to her. They were worth more than the two-day motel bill. She knew it, too.

The whistle was in her lips again.

"All right, all right," I said disgustedly. "Take them."

Sal cut in. "Herbie, where we gonna put all the mon—"

"Sal!" I yelled.

Our manager blinked at the two of us, stepping back with her haul. "These'll do nicely, fellas."

"You're welcome!" I snarled and got back in the car. On the way out of the drive I glanced at the rear-view mirror.

"Sal!" I snapped. "Take a look behind us!"

My partner did just that. And almost keeled over.

"What do you see next to the sweet old lady, Sal?"

"It's—it's—"

"Yes, Sal. It's your great Dean. Or should I say *her* Great Dane?"

We had a marvelous total of $1.64 between us.

Breakfast, which consisted of doughnuts and coffee, ate up 42 cents, including sales tax. We had a full tank of gas and one remaining cheap, cardboard suitcase.

"We need ourselves another bag, Sal," I said.

"Where we gonna get one?"

A good question. Smith City was too small to have an airport and we couldn't afford the worst reject from a rundown pawnshop. That left hotels, motels, and the bus station.

The Smith City bus station was surprisingly large and busy. Sal and I took a seat in the combination waiting room-cafeteria and checked out the prospects.

There were several possibilities in the room, but I liked the good-looking redhead with the two kids. She was at a table eating and keeping an eye on her children. Two boys, maybe twelve and ten. Three pieces of expensive luggage, two of the pieces the right size for us.

We waited. I was beginning to get worried, but finally she stood up and walked over to the ticket counter. The older boy followed her.

"Now," I said softly. Big Sal nodded.

There's a secret to stealing from people when they're in the same room, and the secret is to act as though you're half asleep. Try glancing around nervously and the sleepiest soul present will become instantly on guard.

We were doing fine until the little boy, the ten-year-old, unzipped one of the suitcases and pulled out his king snake.

Now you might wonder

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what a kid would be doing with a king snake in a bus station. A similar thought hit me, too. I stopped in the middle of the room wondering what to do next when I saw Big Sal.

Big Sal's eyes were growing. They were getting bigger and bigger, taking in every slink of the snake.

He opened his mouth and "Oooohhhh!" noises came out. My partner's lips were trembling, his hands shaking, and then his legs were moving. He made an about face and raced past several people, wailing, "Oooohhhh!"

I sighed and went outside to find Sal. He was sitting on a bench making funny noises.

"Are you all right?"

Moan.

"Does that mean yes or no?"

He refused to answer, so I guided him to our car. I got us going and went straight through two stop signs. A police car caught up to me after the second one.

The policeman was quite pleasant. "License, please."

I gave it to him.

"Oooohhhh!"

"What's that?" the policeman asked.

"Uh," I said, "that's my friend. He's not feeling well. Are you, Sal?"

"Oooohhhh!"

The officer frowned. "How come his eyes look funny like that?"

"He's had a difficult morning," I explained.

At that moment Sal muttered, "Little beggars, snakes, and great Deans!"

The policeman blinked, passed me my ticket, I signed it, and got a copy back. "Take care of your friend," he said.

"I think he's already been taken care of," I said and drove out of there.

We eventually decided on cotton laundry bags. They were the only thing we could afford.

Sal was feeling much better. He even talked to me.

"Let's get out of here, Herbie!" he urged, his eyes darting left and right, searching for snakes.

"Right after the bank job," I agreed.

The bank closed on Fridays at six. We parked in front of the building. Five minutes till closing time.

We got out of the car, each carrying an empty laundry bag. Walking normally, without hurrying, we reached the front glass door.

"All right," I said, and we slipped on paper Halloween masks.

I opened the door.

"All right," I commanded, "this is a—"

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I got cut off by a magician in a long flowing cape. He handed me a glassful of something and yelled, "Glad you could make it!"

The room was filled with people, all howling. People in costume. I moved forward and bumped into the Lone Ranger and a tiny Tonto. Over in one corner a band was blasting out a horrible mixture of rock and country and western music.

I couldn't believe it. This wasn't happening to us. I kept repeating that thought over and over as people swarmed around us. There were pirates, Cleopatras, animals, and a fortuneteller with a fake nose.

Big Sal yelled in my ear, "Lookit the sign!"

Hanging over the cashiers' windows it read:

WELCOME TO OUR 25TH ANNIVERSARY PARTY
THE MANAGEMENT

I looked at Big Sal and Big Sal looked at me. "Come on," I finally said, pushing an elf aside.

It took us a quarter of an hour to convince one of the tellers—dressed as a witch, by the way—that we actually were bank robbers. She filled our bags while everyone danced and laughed merrily, unaware of what was happening.

Sacks in hand, we shoved our way through the crowd. We reached the door, nudged aside the Devil, and went out.

Guess who was waiting outside? King Kong, that's who. He pressed a gun in my stomach, grunting, "I'll take the money, sonny."

I handed over my bag. Big Sal handed over his.

The big ape marched us to our car, told us to get in, and disappeared for a moment. He came back, saying, "If I was you, sonny, I'd leave town. Fast. Understand, sonny?"

I nodded. I was shaking. The big ape left.

"What's next?" I asked Sal.

He didn't know either.

What actually came next were five police cars, six policemen armed with shotguns, and a roadblock.

We were put in the rear seat of a police car and driven off. A policeman asked me, "Where's the money?"

"King Kong took it," I told him.

He frowned. "Smart guy, huh? Sonny will love you."

Bells began to ring in my head.

"What? What was that?" I said.

"Sonny. Our police chief."

"Big guy? Calls people 'sonny'?"

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The policeman grinned. "That's our Sonny."

Oh, it was beautiful. The Chief of Police had been at the bank costume party. He'd seen us, maybe heard us, sized up the situation, and waited. The chance of a lifetime: let us take all the risk and he grabs all the cash. He'd jotted down our car license number and phoned in a tip. Perfect.

The policeman asked again, "Where's the money?"

I took a deep breath and began, "You're never going to believe this—"

I was right.

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THE REAL SHAPE OF THE COAST

by JOHN LUTZ

WHERE THE SLENDER peninsula crooks like a beckoning finger in the warm water, where the ocean waves crash in umbrellas of foam over the low-lying rocks to roll and ebb on the narrow white-sand beaches, there squats in a series of low rectangular buildings and patterns of high fences the State Institution for the Criminal Incurably Insane. There are twenty of the sharp-angled buildings, each rising bricked and hard out of sandy soil like an undeniable fact. Around each building is a ten-foot redwood fence topped by barbed wire, and these fences run to the sea's edge to continue as gossamer networks of barbed wire that stretch out to the rocks.

In each of the rectangular buildings live six men, and on days when the ocean is suitable for swimming it is part of their daily habit—indeed, part of their therapy—to go down to the beach and let the waves roll over them, or simply to lie in the purging sun and grow beautifully tan. Sometimes, just out of the grasping reach of the waves, the men might build things in the damp sand, but by

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evening those things would be gone. However, some very interesting things had been built in the sand.

The men in the rectangular buildings were not just marking time until their real death. In fact, the "Incurably Insane" in the institution's name was something of a misnomer; it was just that there was an absolute minimum of hope for these men. They lived in clusters of six not only for security's sake, but so that they might form a more or less permanent sensitivity group—day-in, day-out group therapy, with occasional informal gatherings supervised by young Dr. Montaign. Here under the subtle and skillful probings of Dr. Montaign the men bared their lost souls—at least, some of them did.

Cottage D was soon to be the subject of Dr. Montaign's acute interest. In fact, he was to study the occurrences there for the next year and write a series of articles to be published in influential scientific journals.

The first sign that there was something wrong at Cottage D was when one of the patients, a Mr. Rolt, was found dead on the beach one evening. He was lying on his back near the water's edge, wearing only a pair of khaki trousers. At first glance it would seem that he'd had a drowning accident, only his mouth and much of his throat turned out to be stuffed with sand and with a myriad of tiny colorful shells.

Roger Logan, who had lived in Cottage D since being found guilty of murdering his wife three years before, sat quietly watching Dr. Montaign pace the room.

"This simply won't do," the doctor was saying. "One of you has done away with Mr. Rolt, and that is exactly the sort of thing we are in here to stop."

"But it won't be investigated too thoroughly, will it?" Logan said softly. "Like when a convicted murderer is killed in a prison."

"May I remind you," a patient named Kneehoff said in his clipped voice, "that Mr. Rolt was not a murderer." Kneehoff had been a successful businessman before his confinement, and now he made excellent leather wallets and sold them by mail order. He sat now at a small table with some old letters spread before him, as if he were a Chairman of the Board presiding over a meeting. "I might add," he said haughtily, "that it's difficult to conduct business in an atmosphere such as this."

"I didn't say Rolt was a murderer," Logan said, "but he is—was—supposed to be in here

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for the rest of his life. That fact is bound to impede justice."

Kneehoff shrugged and shuffled through his letters. "He was a man of little consequence—that is, compared to the heads of giant corporations."

It was true that Mr. Rolt had been a butcher rather than a captain of industry, a butcher who had put things in the meat—some of them unmentionable. But then Kneehoff had merely run a chain of three dry-cleaning establishments.

"Perhaps you thought him inconsequential enough to murder," William Sloan, who was in for pushing his young daughter out of a fortieth-story window, said to Kneehoff. "You never did like Mr. Rolt."

Kneehoff began to splutter. "You're the killer here, Sloan! You and Logan!"

"I killed no one," Logan said quickly.

Kneehoff grinned. "You were proved guilty in a court of law—of killing your wife."

"They didn't prove it to me. I should know whether or not I'm guilty!"

"I know your case," Kneehoff said, gazing dispassionately at his old letters. "You hit your wife over the head with a bottle of French Chablis wine, killing her immediately."

"I warn you," Logan said heatedly, "implying that I struck my wife with a wine bottle—and French Chablis at that—is inviting a libel suit!"

Noticeably shaken, Kneehoff became quiet and seemed to lose himself in studying the papers before him. Logan had learned long ago how to deal with him; he knew that Kneehoff's "company" could not stand a lawsuit.

"Justice must be done," Logan went on. "Mr. Rolt's murderer, a real murderer, must be caught and executed."

"Isn't that a job for the police?" Dr. Montaign asked gently.

"The police!" Logan laughed. "Look how they botched my case! No, this is a job for us. Living the rest of our lives with a murderer would be intolerable."

"But what about Mr. Sloan?" Dr. Montaign asked. "You're living with him."

"His is a different case," Logan snapped. "Because they found him guilty doesn't mean he is guilty. He says he doesn't remember anything about it, doesn't he?"

"What's your angle?" Brandon, the unsuccessful mystery bomber, asked. "You people have always got an angle, something in mind for yourselves. The only people you can

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really trust are the poor people."

"My angle is justice," Logan said firmly. "We must have justice!"

"Justice for all the people!" Brandon suddenly shouted, rising to his feet. He glanced about angrily and then sat down again.

"Justice," said old Mr. Heimer, who had been to other worlds and could listen to and hear metal, "will take care of itself. It always does, no matter where."

"They've been waiting a long time," Brandon said, his jaw jutting out beneath his dark mustache. "The poor people, I mean."

"Have the police any clues?" Logan asked Dr. Montaign.

"They know what you know," the doctor said calmly. "Mr. Rolt was killed on the beach between nine fifteen and ten—when he shouldn't have been out of Cottage D."

Mr. Heimer raised a thin speckled hand to his lips and chuckled feebly. "Now, maybe that's justice."

"You know the penalty for leaving the building during unauthorized hours," Kneehoff said sternly to Mr. Heimer. "Not death, but confinement to your room for two days. We must have the punishment fit the crime and we must obey the rules. Any operation must have rules in order to be successful."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Logan said. "The man who killed poor Mr. Rolt must be caught and put to death."

"The authorities are investigating," Dr. Montaign said soothingly.

"Like they investigated my case?" Logan said in a raised and angry voice. "They won't bring the criminal to justice! And I tell you we must not have a murderer here in Compound D!"

"Cottage D," Dr. Montaign corrected him

"Perhaps Mr. Rolt was killed by something from the sea," William Sloan said thoughtfully.

"No," Brandon said, "I heard the police say there was only a single set of footprints near the body and it led from and to the cottage. It's obviously the work of an inside subversive."

"But what size footprints?" Logan asked.

"They weren't clear enough to determine the size," Dr. Montaign said. "They led to and from near the wooden stairs that come up to the rear yard, then the ground was too hard for footprints."

"Perhaps they were Mr. Rolt's own footprints," Sloan said.

Kneehoff grunted. "Stupid!

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Mr. Rolt went to the beach, but he did not come back."

"Well—" Dr. Montaign rose slowly and walked to the door. "I must be going to some of the other cottages now." He smiled at Logan. "It's interesting that you're so concerned with justice," he said. A gull screamed as the doctor went out.

The five remaining patients of Cottage D sat quietly after Dr. Montaign's exit. Logan watched Kneehoff gather up his letters and give their edges a neat sharp tap on the table top before slipping them into his shirt pocket. Brandon and Mr. Heimer seemed to be in deep thought, while Sloan was peering over Kneehoff's shoulder through the open window out to the rolling sea.

"It could be that none of us is safe," Logan said suddenly. "We must get to the bottom of this ourselves."

"But we are at the bottom," Mr. Heimer said pleasantly, "all of us."

Kneehoff snorted. "Speak for yourself, old man."

"It's the crime against the poor people that should be investigated," Brandon said. "If my bomb in the Statue of Liberty had gone off . . . And I used my whole week's vacation that year going to New York."

"We'll conduct our own investigation," Logan insisted, "and we might as well start now. Everyone tell me what he knows about Mr. Rolt's murder."

"Who put you in charge?" Kneehoff asked. "And why should we investigate Rolt's murder?"

"Mr. Rolt was our friend," Sloan said.

"Anyway," Logan said, "we must have an orderly investigation. Somebody has to be in charge."

"I suppose you're right," Kneehoff said. "Yes, an orderly investigation."

Information was exchanged, and it was determined that Mr. Rolt had said he was going to bed at 9:15, saying good night to Ollie, the attendant, in the TV lounge. Sloan and Brandon, the two other men in the lounge, remembered the time because the halfway commercial for "Monsters of Main Street" was on, the one where the box of detergent soars through the air and snatches everyone's shirt. Then at ten o'clock, just when the news was coming on, Ollie had gone to check the beach and discovered Mr. Rolt's body.

"So," Logan said, "the approximate time of death has been established. And I was in my room with the door open. I doubt if Mr. Rolt could have

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passed in the hall to go outdoors without my noticing him, so we must hypothesize that he did go to his room at nine fifteen, and sometime between nine fifteen and ten he left through his window."

"He knew the rules," Kneehoff said. "He wouldn't have just walked outside for everyone to see him."

"True," Logan conceded, "but it's best not to take anything for granted."

"True, true," Mr. Heimer chuckled, "take nothing for granted."

"And where were *you* between nine and ten?" Logan asked.

"I was in Dr. Montaign's office," Mr. Heimer said with a grin, "talking to the doctor about something I'd heard in the steel utility pole. I almost made him understand that all things metal are receivers, tuned to different frequencies, different worlds and vibrations."

Kneehoff, who had once held two of his accountants prisoner for five days without food, laughed.

"And where were *you*?" Logan asked.

"In my office, going over my leather-goods vouchers," Kneehoff said. Kneehoff's "office" was his room, toward the opposite end of the hall from Logan's room.

"Now," Logan said, "we get to the matter of motive. Which of us had reason to kill Mr. Rolt?"

"I don't know," Sloan said distantly. "Who'd do such a thing—fill Mr. Rolt's mouth with sand?"

"You were his closest acquaintance," Brandon said to Logan. "You always played chess with him. Who knows what you and he were plotting?"

"What about you?" Kneehoff said to Brandon. "You tried to choke Mr. Rolt just last week."

Brandon stood up angrily, his mustache bristling. "That was the week *before* last!" He turned to Logan. "And Rolt always beat Logan at chess—that's why Logan hated him."

"He didn't *always* beat me at chess," Logan said. "And I didn't hate him. The only reason he beat me at chess sometimes was because he'd upset the board if he was losing."

"You don't like to get beat at anything," Brandon said, sitting down again. "That's why you killed your wife, because she beat you at things. How middle-class, to kill someone because of that."

"I didn't kill my wife," Logan said patiently. "And she didn't beat me at things.

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Though she was a pretty good business woman," he added slowly, "and a good tennis player."

"What about Kneehoff?" Sloan asked. "He was always threatening to kill Mr. Rolt."

"Because he laughed at me!" Kneehoff spat out. "Rolt was a braggart and a fool, always laughing at me because I have ambition and he didn't. He thought he was better at everything than anybody else—and you, Sloan—Rolt used to ridicule you and Heimer. There isn't one of us who didn't have motive to eliminate a piece of scum like Rolt."

Logan was on his feet, almost screaming. "I won't have you talk about the dead like that!"

"All I was saying," Kneehoff said, smiling his superior smile at having upset Logan, "was that it won't be easy for you to discover Rolt's murderer. He was a clever man, that murderer, cleverer than you."

Logan refused to be baited. "We'll see about that when I check the alibis," he muttered, and he left the room to walk barefoot in the surf.

On the beach the next day Sloan asked the question they had all been wondering.

"What are we going to do with the murderer if we do catch him?" he asked, his eyes fixed on a distant ship that was just an irregularity on the horizon.

"We'll extract justice," Logan said. "We'll convict and execute him—eliminate him from our society!"

"Do you think we should?" Sloan asked.

"Of course we should!" Logan snapped. "The authorities don't care who killed Mr. Rolt. The authorities are probably glad he's dead."

"I don't agree that it's a sound move," Kneehoff said, "to execute the man. I move that we don't do that."

"I don't hear anyone seconding you," Logan said. "It has to be the way I say if we are to maintain order here."

Kneehoff thought a moment, then smiled. "I agree we must maintain order at all costs," he said. "I withdraw my motion."

"Motion, hell!" Brandon said. He spat into the sand. "We ought to just find out who the killer is and liquidate him. No time for a motion—time for action!"

"Mr. Rolt would approve of that," Sloan said, letting a handful of sand run through his fingers.

Ollie the attendant came down to the beach and stood there smiling, the sea breeze

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rippling his white uniform. The group on the beach broke up slowly and casually, each man idling away in a different direction.

Kicking the sun-warmed sand with his bare toes, Logan approached Ollie.

"Game of chess, Mr. Logan?" Ollie asked.

"Thanks, no," Logan said. "You found Mr. Rolt's body, didn't you, Ollie?"

"Right, Mr. Logan."

"Mr. Rolt was probably killed while you and Sloan and Brandon were watching TV."

"Probably," Ollie agreed, his big face impassive.

"How come you left at ten o'clock to go down to the beach?"

Ollie turned to stare blankly at Logan with his flat eyes. "You know I always check the beach at night, Mr. Logan. Sometimes the patients lose things."

"Mr. Rolt sure lost something," Logan said. "Did the police ask you if Brandon and Sloan were in the TV room with you the whole time before the murder?"

"They did and I told them yes." Ollie lit a cigarette with one of those transparent lighters that had a fishing fly in the fluid. "You studying to be a detective, Mr. Logan?"

"No, no," Logan laughed. "I'm just interested in how the police work, after the way they messed up my case. Once they thought I was guilty I didn't have a chance."

But Ollie was no longer listening. He had turned to look out at the ocean. "Don't go out too far, Mr. Kneehoff!" he called, but Kneehoff pretended not to hear and began moving in the water parallel with the beach.

Logan walked away to join Mr. Heimer who was standing in the surf with his pants rolled above his knees.

"Find out anything from Ollie?" Mr. Heimer asked, his body balancing slightly as the retreating sea pulled the sand and shells from beneath him.

"Some things," Logan said, crossing his arms and enjoying the play of the cool surf about his legs. The two men—rather than the ocean—seemed to be moving as the tide swept in and out and shifted the sand beneath the sensitive soles of their bare feet. "It's like the ocean," Logan said, "finding out who killed Mr. Rolt. The ocean works and works on the shore, washing in and out until only the sand and rock remain—the real shape of the coast. Wash the soil away and you have bare rock; wash the lies away and you have bare truth."

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"Not many can endure the truth," Mr. Heimer said, stooping to let his hand drag in an incoming wave, "even in other worlds."

Logan raised his shoulders. "Not many ever learn the truth," he said, turning and walking through the wet sand toward the beach. Amid the onwash of the wide shallow wave he seemed to be moving backward, out to sea . . .

Two days later Logan talked to Dr. Montaign, catching him alone in the TV lounge when the doctor dropped by for one of his mid-day visits. The room was very quiet; even the ticking of the clock seemed slow, lazy, and out of rhythm.

"I was wondering, Doctor," Logan said, "about the night of Mr. Rolt's murder. Did Mr. Heimer stay very late in your office?"

"The police asked me that," Dr. Montaign said with a smile. "Mr. Heimer was in my office until ten o'clock, then I saw him come into this room and join Brandon and Sloan to watch the news."

"Was Kneehoff with them?"

"Yes, Kneehoff was in his room."

"I was in my room," Logan said, "with my door open to the hall, and I didn't see Mr. Rolt pass to go outdoors. So he must have gone out through his window. Maybe the police would like to know that."

"I'll tell them for you," Dr. Montaign said, "but they know Mr. Rolt went out through his window because his only door was locked from the inside." The doctor cocked his head at Logan, as was his habit. "I wouldn't try to be a detective," he said gently. He placed a smoothly manicured hand on Logan's shoulder. "My advice is to forget about Mr. Rolt."

"Like the police?" Logan said.

The hand patted Logan's shoulder soothingly.

After the doctor had left, Logan sat on the cool vinyl sofa and thought. Brandon, Sloan and Heimer were accounted for, and Kneehoff couldn't have left the building without Logan seeing him pass in the hall. The two men, murderer and victim, might have left together through Mr. Rolt's window—only that wouldn't explain the single set of fresh footprints to and from the body. And the police had found Mr. Rolt's footprints where he'd gone down to the beach farther from the cottage and then apparently walked up the beach through the surf to where his path and the path of the murderer crossed.

And then Logan saw the only remaining possibility—the

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only possible answer.

Ollie, the man who had discovered the body—Ollie alone had had the opportunity to kill! And after doing away with Mr. Rolt he must have noticed his footprints leading to and from the body; so at the wooden stairs he simply turned and walked back to the sea in another direction, then walked up the beach to make his "discovery" and alert the doctor.

Motive? Logan smiled. Anyone could have had motive enough to kill the bragging and offensive Mr. Rolt. He had been an easy man to hate.

Logan left the TV room to join the other patients on the beach, careful not to glance at the distant white-uniformed figure of Ollie painting some deck chairs at the other end of the building.

"Tonight," Logan told them dramatically, "we'll meet in the conference room after Dr. Montaign leaves and I promise to tell you who the murderer is. Then we'll decide how best to remove him from our midst."

"Only if he's guilty," Kneehoff said. "You must present convincing, positive evidence."

"I have proof," Logan said.

"Power to the people!" Brandon cried, leaping to his feet.

Laughing and shouting, they all ran like schoolboys into the waves.

The patients sat through their evening session with Dr. Montaign, answering questions mechanically and chattering irrelevantly, and Dr. Montaign sensed a certain tenseness and expectancy in them. Why were they anxious? Was it fear? Had Logan been harping to them about the murder? Why was Kneehoff not looking at his letters, and Sloan not gazing out the window?

"I told the police," Dr. Montaign mentioned, "that I didn't expect to walk up on any more bodies on the beach."

"You?" Logan stiffened in his chair. "I thought it was Ollie who found Mr. Rolt."

"He did, really," Dr. Montaign said, cocking his head. "After Mr. Heimer left me I accompanied Ollie to check the beach so I could talk to him about some things. He was the one who saw the body first and ran ahead to find out what it was."

"And it was Mr. Rolt, his mouth stuffed with sand," Sloan murmured.

Logan's head seemed to be whirling. He had been so sure! Process of elimination. It had to be Ollie! Or were the two men, Ollie and Dr. Montaign, in it together? They had to be! But

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that was impossible! There had been only one set of footprints.

Kneehoff! It must have been Kneehoff all along! He must have made a secret appointment with Rolt on the beach and killed him. But Rolt had been walking alone until he met the killer, who was also alone! And *someone* had left the fresh footprints, the single set of footprints, to and from the body.

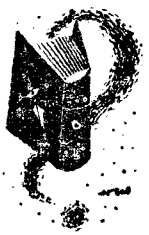
Kneehoff must have seen Rolt, slipped out through his window, intercepted him, and killed him. But Kneehoff's room didn't have a window! Only the two end rooms had windows, Rolt's room and Logan's room!

A single set of footprints—they could only be his own! *His own!*

Through a haze Logan saw Dr. Montaign glance at his watch, smile, say his goodbyes, and leave. The night breeze wafted through the wide open windows of the conference room with the hushing of the surf, the surf wearing away the land to bare rock.

"Now," Kneehoff said to Logan, and the moon seemed to light his eyes, "who exactly is our man? Who killed Mr. Rolt? And what is your evidence?"

Ollie found Logan's body the next morning, face down on the beach, the gentle lapping surf trying to claim him. Logan's head was turned and half buried and his broken limbs were twisted at strange angles, and around him the damp sand was beaten with, in addition to his own, four different sets of footprints



CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
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The kid looked to be about 22 or 23, and he had a story to get off his chest . . .

THE STRAY BULLET

by GARY BRANDNER

THERE WERE PLENTY OF empty stools in Leo's, it being the Monday after Easter, but the kid followed Hickman all the way to the end of the bar and sat down next to him. Normally, Hickman would not have minded having company, but on this Monday evening he was tired and would have preferred to sit alone.

The kid looked to be about 22 or 23, and he needed a shave. Hickman shifted his stool a fraction of an inch farther away and concentrated on the glassy stare of the deer's head mounted behind the bar.

"Quiet night," the kid said.

"Yeah," Hickman grunted. He motioned to the bartender who was pulling on a red vest. "One of the usual, Leo."

The bartender dropped ice cubes into a squat glass and poured whiskey over them. He set the drink in front of Hickman and turned to the kid.

"What'll it be?"

"I'll have a glass of beer," the kid said.

"How about a sandwich, Mr. Hickman?" the bartender asked while he filled a glass from the beer tap.

"No, thanks, Leo. I'm trying to lose a few pounds."

The bartender patted his own stomach. "That's what I ought to do, but I'd rather be fat and happy than thin and miserable. As long as the girls don't complain, right?"

"Sure," said Hickman.

Leo picked up the money for the drinks and went down the bar to ring it up.

"This is my first trip to Los Angeles," the kid said. "I'm from Oregon."

"Nice state," Hickman said. "Green. Rains a lot, though."

The kid leaned over and peered intently into Hickman's face. "Look, do you mind if I tell you a story? I have to tell it to somebody all the way through just one time. If you're a hunter it should interest you. It's a story about a stray bullet."

Hickman studied the kid for

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a few moments. He was thin, almost frail, under the too-heavy checkered jacket. He had an unruly shock of brown hair and was overdue for a shave. His eyes had a pinched, hurting look.

"Okay," Hickman said, "let's hear it."

The kid signaled for Leo to bring each of them another drink, and began to speak in a tight voice.

"My name is Wesley Mize. Last September I was married in Portland to a girl named Judy who I knew ever since we were in grade school. She was blonde and cute with sky-blue eyes the size of half dollars.

"For our honeymoon I took a week off from my job in a sporting goods store. We planned to just drive around our own state. On the second day we were headed out Highway 58 east of Eugene when Judy spotted an old logging road leading off into the woods. She was sure there would be wild blackberries, which she loved, up that way, so I turned off the highway and drove as far as I could before the brush got too thick.

"We got out of the car and, sure enough, wild blackberries were everywhere. Judy laughed and danced around like a little girl. She got a plastic bucket out of the car and ran ahead of me to fill it up with the berries.

"She went running up on top of a little rise then, and she turned to wave for me to come on. She said, 'Hurry, Wes, come see what I found.'

"I started up to where she was waiting for me, but I never did see what she found. Just as I got to the rise where she was standing, a bullet went through her head and killed my wife of two days."

"Hey, that's terrible," Hickman said, feeling that he should say something.

"I just about went crazy," the kid went on. "I never heard the shot that killed her, but then there were three more in quick succession. I didn't see where they hit, I just started running at the sound like I was chasing the devil. My foot got caught in some roots and I fell. It broke two bones in my right leg. Somehow, I don't know how, I must have crawled back to Judy's body, because that's where they found me in shock about six hours later. If a patrolman hadn't seen where our car turned off the highway and gone up to investigate, we might both still be there."

"That was lucky, anyway," Hickman said.

"Was it?" Wesley Mize let the question hang between them like smoke. "I spent the next five months in the hospital

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while they tried to fit my leg back together. There wasn't a single hour of those one hundred and forty-seven days that I didn't wish it was me who died instead of Judy."

"Couldn't the police tell anything about who fired the shots?"

"Not much. They knew it was a 30-06 deer rifle. An empty whiskey bottle was found where the shots came from. They guessed the guy was shooting at an old signpost where the logging road turned off. Just having a little target practise. He hit the post three times. His first shot was the stray that killed Judy. He never even knew he hit anybody. There was a screen of brush right there and you couldn't see to the road."

"That's really a tough break," Hickman said. "It's too bad you didn't at least get a look at the guy's car."

"Oh, but I did. I not only got a look at his car, I read the California license number, and I saw the man who did the shooting. I saw his fat drunken face as he threw the bottle out and drove away. He was weaving all over the road. Probably didn't remember a thing the next day. I was running after the car when I caught my foot and fell."

"Then why couldn't the police locate the man if you knew his license number and what he looked like?"

Wesley Mize stood up and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "I'll tell you the rest of the story when I get back," he said.

As the kid limped toward the Men's Room, Leo came over to Hickman and leaned on the bar.

"That guy's getting kind of loud," he said. "Is he giving you any trouble?"

"No, I think he's all right. He's all unstrung about something that happened to his wife. I think he just wants to get the story off his chest."

"If he starts to get out of line give me the high sign. I heard him say he's from Oregon, and those people don't much like us Californians. For my money they can keep their state."

"It does rain a lot," said Hickman.

The kid came back and sat on his stool. Leo gave him a hard look and sidled away down the bar.

"The reason the police didn't catch the guy," the kid said, picking right up on his story, "is that I didn't tell them about seeing him."

"What would you do that for?" Hickman asked. "Didn't you want him punished?"

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"That's exactly why I did it. I want him *punished*, not slapped on the wrist. As soft as the courts are these days, they would probably let him off with a suspended sentence. That man destroyed the most beautiful thing in my world. There is only one punishment for what he did. He's got to die.

"During those long months when I was in the hospital there was just one reason for me to live—so that I could come after the man who took my wife . . . and kill him."

"You mean you're going to try to find the guy yourself?"

"I mean I *have* found him. It was easy. I wrote to the California Department of Motor Vehicles and gave them the license number. They wrote back the name of the car's owner. It turned out he lives here in Los Angeles."

Hickman felt a sudden clutch of fear. "You have his address?"

"That's right. I went to his house today. I waited until I saw him come out to make sure he was the one, then I followed him right here to this very bar."

Hickman looked down and saw that the kid was holding a .45-caliber service automatic in his lap.

"Wait a minute, son," Hickman cried, "you're making a mistake!"

"No mistake," the kid said.

As their voices rose, Leo came hurrying up the bar. When he reached the spot across from the seated men, Wesley Mize raised the big pistol and shot him in the face. Leo was knocked back against the rows of bottles, then he pitched forward, smacking against the bar as he fell.

Hickman sat as though welded to the bar stool. Wesley Mize laid the automatic on the damp surface of the bar and pushed it toward him.

"I won't need this any more," the kid said. "The stray bullet is home now."

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THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP MYSTERY

Part Three: *The Knight*

by MR. X

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE: When a masked gang hijacks a prison van and engineers the escape of six convicted criminals, Sheriff Barker and Inspector Fleming turn to David Piper, known as The Manhunter, for assistance. Piper, Director of the state's Department of Apprehension, has numerous underworld contacts, but they offer little help in this case. The six criminals seem to have completely vanished, and there is no indication that the escape was planned by the most notorious of them, underworld kingpin Nick Bruno.

Tracking down one of the six, forger Joe Reilly, Piper captures him at a small art gallery where he has been selling bogus paintings. Then news comes that a second of the escaped six, swindler Charlie Hall, has been found murdered in a hotel room. One-eyed Tommy, a stool pigeon, tells Piper that Hall had stolen money from a number of local gamblers, and gives him a list of their names.

One man on the list is theatrical agent Marc Litzen, whom Piper has met in the case before, but the killer is finally proved to be Ronald Summerhill, desk clerk at the hotel where Hall's body was found. But Piper realizes that there are contradictions and unexplained details when the autopsy report on Hall shows that he had been

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drugged with sleeping pills at the time he was murdered.

"Charlie Hall went to a hotel where a man he'd cheated out of $8,000 was employed; he signed the register with a simple, transparent alias; in his room Hall didn't use the only door locks that might have protected him, and calmly took several sleeping pills; then he went to bed—and waited to be murdered. Does any of that make sense?"

PIPER WAS RESTLESS for the remainder of the morning, pacing his office and even emerging on occasion to bark at Susan, something he rarely did. The case was going badly, even though two of the six had now been accounted for. He went out early to lunch, but he didn't eat. Instead, he spent the hour tracking down assorted stool pigeons who frequented the midtown area.

Finally, by one o'clock, he was back in the rear booth at the Winking Moon, waiting for Tommy One-Eye, his most trusted informer. He had to wait longer than usual, and he was almost ready to leave when Tommy slipped casually into the seat opposite him.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Manhunter."

"I'm at a dead end, Tommy. I was hoping you'd heard something more."

"Nothing much—just that it's big."

"It?"

"The reason they were sprung. There's talk that it might involve a huge robbery, something in the millions."

David Piper came alive with interest. This was the first confirmation he'd heard of his own pet theory. "Why do you say that, Tommy?"

"The three guys who pulled the break—the ones who ambushed that prison van—have been paid off. I hear they got fifty grand each, plus one-way tickets to Brazil."

Piper gave a low whistle. "That's big money for just a few minutes' work."

"Damn right! I hear they were on the plane to Rio within forty-eight hours, too. Somebody wanted them out of the country fast. With an investment like that already made, it has to be a big-money deal."

"Heard anything else?"

Tommy shrugged and scratched at the bristle of his beard. "Just that Bruno is back in operation."

"Back?"

"That's the word I get. He's in hiding, but a couple of the boys have seen him."

Piper felt his heart sink a little at the news. Just when

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things were beginning to point toward a conspiracy of some sort, here was word that another of the six had broken away and gone on his own. What sort of conspiracy could there be with the remaining three, one of them a girl? "Who's his top lieutenant now?" Piper asked.

"Sammy Sargent, same as always."

Piper nodded. He knew Sammy slightly—a coldly ruthless operator who wouldn't hesitate to pull a double-cross if enough money was involved. "Think Sammy paid the three guys to spring his boss?"

Tommy chuckled. "You kidding, Manhunter? He was better off with Bruno in jail."

"Could I get to Bruno?"

"He's guarded like Fort Knox. Nobody even knows where he's holed up. The guys I talked to were taken there blindfolded."

"How about Sammy Sargent?"

"Maybe. He turns up around town occasionally."

Piper slipped a folded bill across the table. "See what you can do, Tommy."

The one-eyed man nodded and slid out of the booth. He strolled slowly out the front door of the Winking Moon without looking back. Piper waited five minutes and then he followed the informer out.

The Raker County Jail was a bleak gray structure that was built to resemble a medieval castle. Its turreted battlements were purely decorative, and yet they gave the distinct impression of being capable of withstanding a lengthy siege by the forces of evil. David Piper had always disliked the place. It seemed a symbol of all that was wrong with antiquated prison conditions.

He walked down the whitewashed corridor to Sheriff Barker's office, remembering the first time he'd met the man. It had been a somewhat unpleasant confrontation, following a break three years ago by a single convict. Both Piper and the Department of Apprehension were new then, and he'd been appalled to learn that a jail the size of Raker County's allowed prisoners to roam with a fair amount of freedom inside its walls. This convict, sent back alone to his cell after questioning, had simply climbed through a ventilating duct and escaped.

Practices were tighter and more efficient at the jail now, but he could still understand Barker's concern about being blamed for the prison-van escape. Though it had happened away from the jail, newspapers

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had been quick to point out the county's past record of lax conditions.

"The Sheriff around?" he asked a deputy in the office.

"He's down in Identification," the man replied without looking up. "End of the hall."

Piper found him with a stack of fingerprint cards, carefully pressing the inked digits of prisoners in the proper spaces. "How are you, Mr. Piper? Be with you in a few minutes."

Piper sat down to watch. "Take your time. Maybe I'll learn something."

Sheriff Barker motioned the next prisoner in line forward and inked his fingers. "Won't learn much here, except how bungling some of my deputies are. Got one damn fool on the night shift can't even take fingerprints right. I usually have to do it over myself." He rolled the prisoner's thumb and fingers on the card and then reached for the other hand.

"How many sets do you make?" Piper asked.

"Three—one for us, one for the state, and one for Washington. There, that does it." He waved the last of the prisoners away and watched the deputy take them in tow. "Now what can I do for you?"

Piper came right to the point. "There are still four prisoners at large, and I'm stuck with my theory that they're together on some sort of big caper." He didn't bother to add the information about the $50,000 payments to the members of the hijacking gang. "I want to know more about the four—about their backgrounds and any crime specialties they might have."

"Well, the girl's strictly an amateur, of course. Of the four, your best bet for something like that would be Jack Larner."

"The bank robber."

"Right. Here's the card on him. Age forty-seven, stocky build, brown hair and beard when arrested, tattoo of a dancing girl on his left arm."

"If I remember correctly, he's the one who was involved with some Miami gang in his youth."

"Right. But now he's strictly a loner. We got him on a car theft and assault in connection with his last bank job, but we figure he's pulled at least a dozen more in the past year."

Piper nodded and took out his tobacco pouch. "Either you or Fleming mentioned the difficulty of getting a firm identification during the bank job. Why's that?"

"He's used some cute disguises in his time. Dressed up like a girl once. This last time he had the beard, and a bandage round his head. The beard

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looked fake but it wasn't. The bandage looked real, but it wasn't, either. He's tough to spot."

"You mentioned a tattoo. Does he still like the girls?"

"He likes them. Especially dancers. I asked him about it when I was booking him." The Sheriff chuckled at the memory. "He claimed dancers have the best legs, muscles and all. Right now he's been living with a belly dancer down at the Greek place."

Piper nodded. There was only one Greek place in Raker County that had belly dancers. "The Lifted Veil."

"That's the place. Girl's stage name is Fiona."

"I'll look her up."

"He'd be crazy to go back there. We've had it staked out."

Piper smiled. "I'll look her up anyway. I like dancers' legs, *too*."

The Lifted Veil was owned by a Greek named Matsoukas who enjoyed drinking ouzo with his customers and even dancing with them in the traditional native manner. David Piper knew him slightly, and recognized his tall frame and mustached face behind the crowded bar.

"Matsoukas, I'm looking for a girl named Fiona."

The Greek nodded his shaggy head. "She's on next, old friend. Have a table and you shall see her."

Piper nodded and chose one of several empty tables up front. This early in the evening, on a weeknight, business at The Lifted Veil was largely confined to the bar. Neighborhood men, mostly, more interested in the ouzo and the companionship of the bar than in the dubious charms of the too-familiar belly dancers up front.

The Greek orchestra switched presently from traditional melodies to the up-tempo beat they used to bring on the next act. An off-stage voice announced the appearance of Fiona, and suddenly she was there, all veils and soft flesh, moving with a grace and speed that seemed to blur the sequined reflection of the spotlights that followed her every move. She was good, Piper admitted reluctantly—much better than the usual run of dancers at the Veil.

He watched her drop the veil that covered her midriff and go down on her knees in the classic position of the belly dancer, throwing back her head and shoulders while she swayed her body in tempo with the music. Then she was up, dancing like a demon, using the veils as Salome must have. She paused at Piper's table, draping one end around his neck, then whisking

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it away in a burst of twirling.

When she paused by him again, Piper stuffed a dollar bill into the band of her sequined bra and said, "I'll buy you a drink later." She smiled and danced away, seeking more dollars from the men who lined the bar.

Finally she vanished through the stage curtains and the Greek orchestra switched to something slower. Piper sipped his drink and waited. It was ten minutes before she reappeared, dressed now in the regular street clothes that the other dancers wore when not performing. She said a few words to Matsoukas at the bar and then joined Piper at the table.

"You're very good," he said, meaning it.

She shrugged and he was aware for the first time of the handsome straightness of her nose, the inky blackness of her fine Greek eyes. "It's a dying profession," she told him. "I'm the only Greek girl in town still doing it. The rest are retired strippers or topless dancers or just college kids earning a little extra money."

"Your name is Fiona?" He signaled the waiter for drinks.

"That's my name here."

He nodded. After she'd sipped her drink he said, "I'm looking for Jack Larner."

For a full minute she said nothing, and he thought she might get up and walk away. But finally she stubbed out her cigarette and said, "You're a cop. I'd figured you were too polite for a cop."

"I'm not exactly a cop, but I'm looking for Larner. I understand you're his girl."

"Off and on." She lit another cigarette. "He always had a thing for dancers. Even has one tattooed on his arm."

"So I understand."

"You understand a lot. But I guess you don't understand Jack Larner. He's—hell, he's like one of those knights that used to ride around back in the Middle Ages. A perfect gentleman, even a sort of champion of womanhood. Sometimes it's a pleasure just being with a man like that."

Piper snorted. "Jack Larner is a killer and bank robber."

"The killing was long ago, in Miami. He told me all about it. He punched a man in a tavern who was swearing at his girl. The man hit his head and died, and Jack went to prison for manslaughter. See, even then he was something of a knight!"

"And I suppose these banks he robs are dragons."

"Maybe to him they are. They're part of the Establishment, the oppression of the minorities. Like what's happened in Greece the last few

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years. He opposes the Establishment just like the hippies do."

"You've painted him in glowing colors, but I just don't buy a forty-seven-year-old hippie who robs banks."

"Buy it or not, that's the truth. Jack Larner is a fine man!"

"Have you seen him or talked to him since his escape?"

"No. You should know that. The cops have been watching me day and night."

"Does he have any other friends around town? Male or female?"

She shook her head. "He's strictly a loner."

"He escaped with five other people," Piper reminded her.

"He's still a loner. If you find him he'll be alone."

"Thanks," he told her. He got to his feet and was starting to leave when one more question occurred to him. "Fiona, do you have an agent?"

"A what?"

"A booking agent, a manager. Most show people have one."

"Oh, sure. Marc Litzen handles my bookings, when I have any. Mostly, though, I perform here at The Lifted Veil."

"Litzen." David Piper thanked her again and left. The evening air was crisp and cool, with a bright moon overhead. He walked to where he'd parked the car, thinking about it. Marc Litzen was now connected with three of the escaped prisoners. He was the agent for Joe Reilly's wife and Jack Larner's girl. And he'd been swindled out of some money by Charlie Hall.

Perhaps a coincidence. Perhaps more than that.

In the morning Susan buzzed him on the intercom. "I have Tommy on the phone. He says it's important."

"Put him on."

Tommy's familiar voice came through, talking fast. "You still want to see Sammy Sargent?"

"I sure do."

"He'll be at the track this afternoon. Box R-11."

"Thanks."

Tommy hung up, and Piper sat tapping the desk for a moment. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of Marc Litzen's office. The agent answered at once, his voice gruff and preoccupied.

"This is David Piper."

"Oh, yes."

"We're still investigating the escape from the prison van, and your name has come up again. The third time."

"How's that? I don't know any of the others."

"One of your clients is a

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dancer named Fiona."

"Fiona?" There was a moment's pause. "Oh, you mean the belly dancer at the Greek's place. She's been down there almost a year now, but I guess I've represented her a few times in the past."

"Her boy friend is Jack Larner, another of the escapees."

"Well, hell, how was I supposed to know that? I haven't even seen Fiona in maybe six months. And I certainly never laid eyes on Larner."

"If you say so," Piper said softly. "How's Joe Reilly's wife?"

"She's taking it pretty good, now that he's locked up again. I may have a good part for her off-Broadway. She's considering it."

"Well, I'll be in touch," Piper said. "If Larner should happen to contact you—"

"Why should he contact me? I don't even know the man."

"Oh, yes, that's what you said." Piper hung up and once more found himself pondering Marc Litzen's place in it all. He could only be an innocent bystander, yet . . .

Next Piper phoned Inspector Fleming at Headquarters. "Anything new on the Hall autopsy?"

"Just what we discussed yesterday—the evidence of sleeping pills in his system. The body's still at the morgue, waiting for somebody to claim it. If nobody shows up by tomorrow, the county will have to bury him."

"No sign of the missing four?"

"Nothing—not a lead."

Piper cleared his throat, remembering something. "My wife thinks she knows the girl—Kate Gallery. Did she do some fashion modeling once?"

"I believe so. Bathing suits, I think."

"That's the girl. I'll have to tell Jennie to keep an eye out for her in New York."

On the other end of the line Inspector Fleming chuckled. "What happened to your theory that they were all connected?"

"It's suffering these days," Piper admitted frankly. "By the way, I understand Bruno is back running things."

"I hadn't heard. But I'm not surprised."

"Look, I'll get back to you. I have to go out to the race track this afternoon."

Fleming sounded interested. "Got a tip on a sure thing?"

"Let's call it a long shot."

November racing in upstate New York was not anyone's idea of a comfortable activity. The days were damp and chilly,

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with more than occasional snow flurries to whiten the turf. And although the grandstand and clubhouse were enclosed and heated, horses and riders and trainers all betrayed a dislike of the weather. This was the final week of it, though, before the winter closing, and the horse bettors had turned out in force.

Piper made his way through the crowd to the section of box seats. There were four seats in R-11, but only two were occupied--by Sammy Sargent and a girl whom Piper had never seen before. Sammy was dressed in a loud checkered sports coat and a loud striped tie, with fashionably long sideburns that were new since the last time Piper had seen him.

"Hello, Sammy. How's your luck today?"

Sargent glanced up, off guard, his lips twisted into a sort of sneer. He was not the friendliest of men under the best of circumstances. "Piper, isn't it? The state cop?"

"I've been called worse."

The girl twisted in her seat. "Sammy, I wanna bet on Number Four."

"All right, all right! I'll place it for you."

Piper stepped aside to let him pass and then followed along. "Got any good tips today, Sammy?"

The little man turned, pausing on the steps. "What is this, anyway? What're you after?"

"Information, Sammy. Information about Nick Bruno. I hear he's back running things."

"Bruno's gone. South America, I think."

"That's not what I hear, Sammy, I hear he's back in charge, hiding out somewhere."

The eyes squinted menacingly. "Quit bothering me, cop. I gotta make a bet."

"I want him, Sammy. I want Bruno and the other three."

"Well, good luck to you!"

Sargent continued down to the booths, with Piper behind him. The area was hectic with prerace activity, and Piper had to push through the crowd to keep up with Sammy. "The state might be willing to make a deal," he said cautiously. "A lighter sentence if Bruno turns himself in, along with the other three."

Sammy bought his tickets and stood for a moment pondering something. "Come over here," he said suddenly. He led the way to an empty alcove off the main betting area. "All right, now. What do you want?"

"Bruno and Courtney and Lamer and the girl."

"Hell, you don't want much, do you?"

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"Do you know where they are, Sammy?"

Bruno's lieutenant debated another moment and then asked, "If I gave you a tip on one of them, would you leave Bruno alone?"

"Now you're the one wanting to make a deal."

"Sure, if I can."

"You admit Bruno's back running his rackets?"

"I'm not admitting anything." There was a roar from the crowd as the unseen horses broke from the starting gate. "Come on—I have to watch the race."

Piper sighed. "I'm making no promises unless Bruno surrenders. But I'm listening if you want to give me a name."

Sammy Sargent was staring down at the garishly printed tickets in his hand. "Jack Larner," he said quietly, his voice almost lost in the rising roar from the grandstand. "Don't say I told you, but look for him at Mid-State Airport on Friday morning."

"What? The airport?"

But Sammy Sargent slipped quickly away, fading into the sudden influx of bettors. The race was over, and the winners were anxious to collect.

Piper considered going after him but he knew Sammy would not repeat what he'd said in front of the girl. Friday at the airport. It might be nothing, but it was worth checking out.

He drove downtown to Inspector Fleming's office, and found the detective chief relaxing with a stack of Wanted circulars. "Well, Mr. Piper, good to see you again. Any clues on our missing four?"

"Maybe." He took out his pipe and tobacco pouch and dropped into a vacant chair. "I've gotten a tip from somebody that one of the escapees, Jack Larner, will try to leave town Friday morning. If we're at the airport we might be able to grab him."

Fleming frowned at the news. "How good a tipster is this?"

"Why?"

"It just seems odd that Larner would let the word get around two days in advance that he was catching a plane out of here. Hell, what does he even need a plane for? There are cars and trains and buses out of town. There's even the tour boat down the Hudson to New York. He doesn't need a plane, and he sure doesn't need to spread his plans around town days in advance."

Piper had to admit the validity of Fleming's objections. Nevertheless, he said, "It was a good tip, Inspector. I think we ought to be there." The Manhunter took his leave.

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Thursday passed like a day apart. A light fog hung over the city, slowing traffic and fraying tempers, and for the first time since the mass escape, news of it was edged off page one of the papers. Nothing happened—nothing but the fog.

Piper stayed close to his office and tried a few phone calls, but no one answered. Tommy was out of sight, Sheriff Barker was on another case, and even his wife Jennie had left her New York apartment. He felt as if the world were deserting him, and by the time Friday morning dawned he would have been thankful for anything at all in the way of action.

The airport was jammed with travelers—some of them held over from the previous day's canceled flights. Piper and Fleming moved through the crowds near the main entrance, studying faces, watching for signs. A pilot in navy-blue uniform went by and smiled.

"He'll be disguised," the Inspector grumbled. "He's a master of it."

Piper merely grunted. "There are certain things he can't disguise, if only we knew where to look for him."

"I've got a couple of men out at the parking lot. Think I need more?"

"It's hard to say. Maybe we're just chasing another of your will-o'-the-wisps." Piper's eyes were busy, scanning the passing faces. Remembering that Larner had once dressed in women's clothing, he tried not to miss a face in the crowd. But it was impossible to see everyone. "How many other entrances are there, Inspector?"

"Two, but this is the main one. The other is down at the other end, by the bank."

"Bank!"

As if to emphasize the word, an alarm sounded at that moment from the opposite end of the airlines building. Fleming and Piper looked at each other for a split second, then both broke into a run.

By the time they reached the small branch office of the bank, near the other entrance, Fleming had his gun out and they were plowing a path through converging onlookers attracted by the alarm. Piper went into the bank right behind Fleming, took one look at the stunned manager sitting on the floor holding his head, and asked the frightened girl teller, "What did he look like?"

"I—" She was in a state of shock. Finally the words came out, in a panicked rush. "A priest! It was a priest! He had a gun—"

"Damn," Piper muttered, running outside to the terminal

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mall. A priest's collar and black bib were too easy to dispose of. By now Larner might be any one of a hundred other people.

Other police were arriving now, and Fleming joined him, the gun back in its holster. "There's a regular currency shipment from the Federal Reserve Bank every Friday morning," he explained. "It's kept in the vault here till the armored car picks it up after lunch. Our so-called priest was waiting when they brought it in."

Piper cursed again. "How much?"

"Two suitcase-sized packages, but he could only carry one. He had to leave the other. They think maybe he got around twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars, but it could be much more, depending on the denominations of the bills."

"All right," Piper said, "it's my fault for not understanding the tip I got. I thought he was going to leave town on a plane, not rob the airport bank. But there's no time for second guessing now. Have your outside men seal off the airport. Nobody leaves."

"You think he's still here?"

"Knowing Larner, he wouldn't try to travel far in that priest's garb. If he took time to change in a Men's Room we just might nab him."

But looking around at the crowded terminal, his words seemed empty. There might be nearly a thousand people milling about. Identifying Jack Larner or anyone else could be a hopeless task. He could hardly check every person's arm for a tattooed dancing girl.

Uniformed officers were fanning out through the terminal now, checking the most likely hiding places. One came out of a Men's Room carrying a collar and square of black cloth. "Found it in the wastebasket," he told Fleming.

"I figured as much." He turned to Piper. "What now? Think he's gone?"

"He must be," Piper answered slowly. "He—" Then he paused, his eyes following the long legs and swinging hips of a girl who had just walked by. Something . . . "Come on!"

"Is it him?"

"Next best thing!" Piper said, catching up with the girl. "Miss Fiona, good to see you again!"

The dark-eyed belly dancer turned at the sound of her name and tried to break away, but Piper held her in a tight grip. "What in hell is this?" she asked.

"You have a bag—going somewhere?"

"I—"

"Step this way, please,

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Miss," Fleming said, using his most authoritative tone. They led her into one of the little airline offices, and Piper took her suitcase.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"We'd like your permission to open this," Piper said. "There's been a robbery."

She unlocked the case and flipped it open. "Nothing but my clothes, gentlemen!"

"Which flight are you taking?"

"The 11:55 to Miami."

"Is Jack Larner traveling with you?"

"Of course not! I told you I haven't seen him. I'm going down there about a job."

Fleming motioned Piper to one side. "What do you think? Can we believe her?"

"He'll be on that plane," Piper said with certainty. "The suitcase with the stolen money is probably already checked through to Miami. It was a clever gimmick—robbing an airport bank and then escaping by plane—but he made the mistake of inviting her along."

"What do we do—check for a tattoo?"

"Damn right! Come on. And bring her along!"

Fleming had a thought. "You're sure she's not Larner in disguise?"

"I'm sure. I saw her dance. Besides, Larner changed disguises in the Men's Room. He could hardly have walked out of there dressed as a woman without attracting some attention. Whatever he looks like now, it's male."

"Then if he's on that flight we've got him."

But it was not quite as simple as that. There were 28 passengers booked on the 11:55 to Miami, including 22 men. It was with much grumbling that they finally consented to take off their coats and roll up their shirt sleeves for an inspection of their left arms.

"Stocky, forty-seven, brown hair," Fleming commented. "A half dozen of them fit the description, but not one has a tattoo."

"And none looks like the mug shot." Piper studied the picture in his hand. "Though it's hard to tell much with that beard. I guess they should have shaved him before taking the mug shot."

"When will we be able to leave?" the copilot asked. "Our flight's five minutes late already."

"Relax," the Inspector told him. "We'll get you out as soon as possible." Then he asked Piper, "What do we do? Hold the most likely ones for fingerprinting?"

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"And have a flock of lawsuits on our hands?"

"We could check the bags for the stolen cash."

Piper shook his head. "If there's no tattoo, there's no cash. Maybe he's on a different flight, planning to meet her down there. Maybe her presence here was just a diversion to keep us occupied."

"Maybe," Fleming admitted grimly.

Fiona came at them bristling. "When are you going to let us go? You have no right to hold us here!"

Piper glanced at the passengers' faces and saw that they were waiting for his reply. He took a deep breath and slapped her across the face. "Shut up, you stupid tramp!"

Then several things happened at once. Piper's eyes were on the gasping, incredulous faces of the passengers, and he missed the movement to his left. There was a flash and the deafening roar of a gunshot, and he felt the bullet tug at his sleeve as he whirled. Then Fleming moved fast, throwing himself onto the man with the gun. They went down in a heap, and Piper pulled his own gun free, running to help.

Fleming looked up, holding the man's hands stretched apart. "Kick his gun away and get the cuffs on while I hold him. He's got the strength of a tiger!"

They got him to his feet at last, and Piper looked him over. "The copilot, of all people! We never thought to check the plane's crew."

"I think we'll find he's not the real copilot."

Fleming grunted, holding onto the man. "Damn it, Piper, next time you pull a trick like that, tip me off in advance. You almost got yourself killed. How in hell did you know it would work, anyway?"

"Larner is a real gentleman, aren't you, Jack? He once killed a man defending a girl's honor, and I just thought he might do it again. When I hit Fiona and called her a tramp, he didn't stop to think. He just tried to shoot me."

Fleming looked at him. Fiona had come over to stand by his side, sobbing quietly. "Got anything to say, Larner?"

Larner had nothing to say.

He'd jumped the real copilot in the parking lot at the airport and left him bound and gagged on the floor of a car. Wearing the copilot's uniform under a black raincoat, with only the priest's collar and bib showing, he'd robbed the bank and then made his quick change. The priest's garb was abandoned in the Men's Room and the black

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raincoat left draped forgetfully over a chair. The suitcase with the money had been checked through to Miami with the regular passenger luggage, and he simply told the pilot he was a replacement for the regular man who was ill.

"Of course," Fleming pointed out later, back downtown, "as soon as he got into the cockpit the pilot would have known he was a fake. Larner didn't know the first thing about flying an airliner."

"It didn't matter," Piper explained. "As soon as the plane took off he planned to draw his gun and force the pilot to fly him and Fiona to Cuba with the money."

"We'll hang onto him this time," Fleming promised. "Tattoo and all."

"I should have tumbled to a crew member," Piper admitted. "The priest's outfit needed black or navy-blue pants, and since no pants were found in the Men's Room he must have still been wearing them. The crew's navy-blue uniforms were a natural answer, if only I'd thought of it sooner."

"You can't think of everything," Fleming said. "Your trick of slapping the girl paid off, anyway."

Piper nodded. "Larner was born four hundred years too late. He should have been a knight in shining armor, when chivalry still meant something, and defending a woman's honor didn't get you arrested."

Sheriff Barker came around the corner then and saw them outside Fleming's office. "I've been looking all over for you guys!"

"What's up?" Piper asked. "We were just getting back another prisoner for you."

"Yeah?" Barker seemed less than interested. "Well, all hell's broken out over at the morgue."

"The morgue?"

"Someone got in during the night and mutilated Charlie Hall's body."

A cold chill went down Piper's spine. "Mutilated it? How?"

Sheriff Barker looked at them both, with a deeply troubled expression. "Someone cut off the head and stole it."

(to be continued next month)

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

This newest adventure of Mr. Strang, the gnomelike little science teacher of Aldershot High School, is no lighthearted affair of mischievous crime. It concerns a deadly serious situation that threatens the very stability and perpetuation of the entire educational system.

"Mr. Strang Finds an Angle" is also unusual as a detective story. In essence Mr. Strang is challenged to solve a "locked room" mystery—but a locked-room mystery "with a difference." For one thing, there is no room. For another thing, there is no door. And yet, as you will see, there is a "locked room" problem, and a real baffler . . .

MR. STRANG FINDS AN ANGLE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

IT WAS AFTER 5:30 ONE afternoon in late fall, and Aldershot High School was nearly deserted. As he walked down the long hall that ran the full length of the building, Murray Crofton—Mr. Crofton to his American history students—heard the click of brooms against chairs, reminding him that the night-crew custodians were busy cleaning up for the next day's onslaught of students.

Crofton was glad he'd stayed in school to mark that last batch of tests. Now he could take the groovy new typing teacher to the movies without wondering how he'd explain to the kids why their papers weren't ready. Besides, Mr. Guthrey, the principal, had stopped by on his way out and was clearly pleased by the sight of one of his staff working late. Crofton felt that his first year of teaching was getting off to a good start. He passed the open door of a broom closet and reached the rear hall which ran at right angles to the one he was in.

A rustling sound came from

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somewhere. Startled, the young teacher turned to his left. At this spot the rear hall went beyond the center corridor, forming a small windowless area, an unlighted cul-de-sac about twelve feet square, lined with the metal doors of student lockers.

Something moved in a shadowy corner. A twinge of apprehension made the teacher's hands tremble slightly. "Come out of there!" he snapped.

There was the crash of a locker door slamming shut. "Why don't you just go home, Mr. Crofton, and forget you seen anything?" came a voice from the darkness.

"Who . . ." Crofton peered into the gloom. "Is that you, Sontag? Your locker's not up here. It's on the bottom floor. And who's that in there with you?" He slowly approached the corner where he could dimly see the outlines of two figures.

There was a sudden swift movement. Crofton gasped as an elbow smashed into his stomach. At almost the same time a fist collided with stunning force just below his right eye. Blindly he struck out, hearing a yelp and then a curse as the edge of his hand hit something. Then an arm raked his legs from under him and he fell heavily to the floor, face downward. He began to roll over. A foot crunched against his ribs, and he fought to keep from blacking out.

Even as he shook his head to clear it, he saw, as if through a dense fog, something above him sweep upward and then down. He put up an arm to protect his face. A heavy blow fell on his arm, and pain streaked up the teacher's shoulder as the bone snapped near the elbow.

Through slitted eyes Crofton saw the upward motion repeated. Whatever it was that had hit him rushed downward again, this time to the side of his head. A million lights spun before his eyes and for a fraction of a second his brain seemed to explode. There was the sound of feet running toward the place where he was lying and a shouting of voices. But Crofton heard none of this; he was unconscious . . .

The following morning Mr. Strang, Aldershot's venerable science teacher, was late getting to school. His ancient purple car, like his own frail body, was reluctant to perform at its best on these nippy fall mornings. When he did arrive and had signed in, he was immediately buttonholed by Art Mickel of the math department.

"Leonard, I hope you

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haven't got any plans for after school today," said Mickel.

"Nothing I can't change, Art. Why? Not another curriculum committee meeting, I hope."

"Young Crofton, the history teacher, got beaten up yesterday after school. Right here in the building. Terrible thing, just terrible. As head of the teachers association I've asked Mr. Guthrey to hold a faculty meeting about it today. He's agreed."

Mr. Strang nodded solemnly. "Of course I'll be there," he replied. "But what about Crofton? Was he hurt badly?"

"He's in critical condition in Beardsley Hospital. I'm going to phone there later today and see if I can get any more information."

"But shouldn't his parents—"

"His father's dead. His mother lives in Minnesota with a married sister, and she's not well enough to travel. He doesn't have any family in this part of the country. Under the circumstances I think the association has a duty to act in his behalf."

"Of course, Art. Do they know who did it?"

Mickel nodded. "No problem there. Four of the custodians heard the scuffling and nabbed the boys just after they'd knocked Crofton down. It was in that little dead end in the rear of the second floor."

"Boys?" Mr. Strang looked at Mickel in amazement. "You mean it was some of our students who did it?" He felt as if a lump of lead had suddenly formed in his stomach. In all his years at Aldershot he'd never heard of anything so foreign to the business of teaching school. Of course, with a student population of over 2000, there were bound to be fights. But the fights usually ended with no more than a bloody nose or a black eye, and almost never involved a teacher. And besides, this wasn't just a fight. It was a deliberate attempt to maim or even kill another human being.

The bell for first period rang, and the homerooms erupted with students. "See you this afternoon, Leonard," said Mickel as he walked off.

At 3:30 that afternoon almost all the teachers of Aldershot High School were present in the auditorium. At a lectern on the stage Principal Marvin W. Guthrey waited patiently while Cal Owens, the audio-visual director, got the hums and squeaks out of the microphone. Then he took a piece of paper from a manila folder and began.

"I'm sure you've already heard," he said slowly, his voice

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echoing through the loudspeakers, "that Mr. Crofton was injured yesterday. I have here a statement from the Board of Education concerning this incident."

The paper crackled as he placed it on the lectern and started to read: "At approximately six o'clock yesterday afternoon in the high school Mr. Murray Crofton, one of our teachers, saw two students in the rear hallway. The students, whose names are being withheld pending further investigation, had no right to be in the building. There was a scuffle between Mr. Crofton and the students, during which Mr. Crofton received several injuries. He is expected to be absent from his teaching duties for an indefinite period of time.

"The two students have been suspended for five days on the charge of loitering in the building. The Board of Education intends to conduct a further investigation."

Guthrey folded the paper carefully and placed it in his pocket. "That is the end of the Board's statement," he said. "It's signed by Mr. Frederick Landerhoff, the Board President. And now, if there are no questions—"

There were whispered conversations among the teachers that sounded like the humming of angry bees. Art Mickel shot up out of his chair. "Mr. Guthrey!" he shouted without waiting to be recognized. "Did I hear you say that Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs were given only five days' suspension—"

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't refer to the boys by name," replied Guthrey. "And to answer your question, yes, I did say five days."

"Let's not beat around the bush," snapped Mickel. "We all know who those two were. And now, Mr. Guthrey, I'd like you to hear something. I phoned Beardsley Hospital today and talked to the doctor in charge of Mr. Crofton's case. It took a little convincing, but I got him to tell me the extent of the 'several injuries' the Board mentioned in their statement. Crofton has three cracked ribs, Mr. Guthrey. He has a broken arm. He's suffered a concussion and has multiple bruises and abrasions. And a fractured skull, Mr. Guthrey—a fractured skull. As of noon today the doctor wasn't really sure whether he'd live, and if he did, whether his teaching ability would be impaired. The doctor also said that in his opinion Mr. Crofton had been beaten with some kind of blunt instrument. And you talk about a punishment of *five days!* If this

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thing wasn't so tragic I'd be laughing at you, Mr. Guthrey. Loitering!" Mickel snorted his contempt and sat down.

"You were pretty rough on him," said Mr. Strang, who was seated next to Mickel.

"Rough, hell!" snarled Mickel. "The next time something like this happens it might be to you or me. If those two boys get away with a slap on the wrist I'm going to leave and find myself a nice safe job. Like bomb disposal or test pilot." He looked toward the steps leading up to the stage. "Who's that character in the Madison Avenue suit going up there?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Mr. Strang. "But I've got a feeling we'll soon find out."

A tall well-groomed man with a small mustache walked toward the lectern and whispered to Guthrey. The principal nodded, and the man took the microphone.

"All of you are concerned about what happened yesterday," the newcomer said. "And I don't blame you. But while your concern is for the teacher, mine is for the boys involved. I'm Boyd Bankhead, and I'm a lawyer. I represent a group called FREE—Fund for the Relief of the Educationally Exploited. Our purpose is to protect the rights of students whose parents can't afford to pay legal fees. The two boys—and you're right, they were Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs—fall into that category. I'm here to see that their rights aren't violated."

"Who's protecting Mr. Crofton's rights?" shouted a teacher.

"Frankly," Bankhead went on, "I'd hoped for a little less vehement reception. Remember, please, I said I was here to protect the boys' rights—not get them off if they're proved guilty. But their guilt must be proved! Now as you heard, Mr. Guthrey has suspended the boys. They were in the building when they shouldn't be, no question about that. But as to any other alleged offenses it would be up to Mr. Crofton to prefer charges—"

"How can he prefer charges?" Mickel snapped. "He may not even live."

"A good point. But the Board, in its statement, did mention further investigation. Conceivably, if it wished, the Board itself could bring additional charges on behalf of the teacher."

"Excuse me." Slowly and stiffly Mr. Strang rose from his chair. "I have a question. In any such investigation as the Board mentioned in its statement you'd be representing Sontag

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and Burroughs. They'd be allowed to testify along with any other witnesses you'd care to call, and then the Board would make up its mind whether the boys had done anything wrong. Is that correct?"

"Essentially, yes," replied Bankhead.

"Then tell me," the teacher went on, "who'd be representing Mr. Crofton?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr.—"

"Strang. Leonard Strang. And since hearings of the type you mention are usually conducted on the adversary system—your side against our side, as it were—I wondered who'd present Mr. Crofton's case."

Bankhead took a close look at the old teacher who was calmly toying with a button on his wrinkled tweed jacket. The old boy wasn't quite the bumbler he might appear to be, thought the lawyer. Bankhead whispered with Guthrey again and then spoke into the microphone.

"Mr. Strang," he said, "you've raised a valid point. Mr. Crofton probably won't be available for quite some time, and since he's not in any position to hire legal aid I've suggested to Mr. Guthrey that your teachers association make arrangements for someone to represent Mr. Crofton at the Board's hearing."

Mr. Strang felt a tug at his sleeve and glanced down to see Mickel smiling up at him. "What about it, Leonard?" asked Mickel. "Want to take the job?"

"Me? Shouldn't we get a lawyer?"

"Leonard, this won't be a trial. It's just a hearing to see if the Board can find out whether the boys really did beat up Crofton and what action if any they'll take. Of course, any facts brought out could be used later in formal legal proceedings. Besides, the association's treasury is pretty low right now. We couldn't afford the kind of lawyer a thing like this would take. How about it?"

After a moment's thought Mr. Strang nodded slowly.

Mickel got up. "Mr. Guthrey," he said. "The Aldershot Teachers Association hereby appoints Mr. Leonard Strang to act for Mr. Crofton at the Board's hearing. He's a tenure teacher with longer service than anyone else in the building. Is there any objection, Mr. Bankhead?"

The lawyer shook his head. Guthrey adjourned the meeting and asked Mr. Strang and Mr. Bankhead to meet him in his office.

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Ten minutes later Marvin W. Guthrey was sitting in the leather swivel chair behind the desk in his office, while Bankhead and Mr. Strang were seated in padded chairs opposite him.

"Mr. Strang," Bankhead began without preamble, "I'd just as soon lay all my cards on the table because I don't think you've got a prayer of proving anything against Bradley and Luke except for being in the building when they shouldn't have been."

"I see." Mr. Strang stoked up his massive briar pipe, emitting clouds of pungent smoke. "Then Mr. Crofton's injuries are purely imaginary, is that it?"

"Oh, there's no denying there was a scuffle."

"Umm. Perhaps 'mugging' might be a better word."

Bankhead was about to shout "Objection!" but caught himself in time. "Who's to say the scuffle or fight wasn't Mr. Crofton's own fault?" he asked in a reasonable manner. "Perhaps Mr. Crofton grabbed one of the boys. The boy pulled away and Mr. Crofton slipped and hit his head on one of the locker projections or on the floor itself."

"I suppose he smashed up his ribs and broke his arm at the same time," replied the teacher. "Dangerous things, those lockers. They'll leap out and take a sock at you when you least expect it. No, Mr. Bankhead, it's too unlikely."

"But you'll agree it *could* have happened that way." Bankhead made it a statement instead of a question. "And remember, Mr. Strang, an accused person is innocent until proved guilty."

"Ophiuroidea!" shouted Mr. Strang, his voice ringing from the walls. "Come off it, Bankhead! I'll buy the smashed ribs *or* the broken arm *or* the fractured skull as an accident. But not all three. Crofton was hit with a club or something and we both know it."

"My responsibility is to the boys," said Bankhead. "It's not up to me to find the weapon. That's your job, and I wish you luck at it. Because you see, Mr. Strang, there was no weapon. That's the heart of my case. There was no weapon!"

The muscles of Mr. Strang's face suddenly went limp and the pipe dropped from between his teeth, scattering ashes onto his lap. "No weapon?" he murmured, looking at Guthrey.

The principal nodded. "Four of our custodial staff reached Mr. Crofton not more than a few seconds after he fell. Bradley and Luke were still bending over him. The

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custodians grabbed them, of course, and then phoned me. I called the police and came right to the school."

"And none of you found anything that might have been used to inflict those injuries on Mr. Crofton?"

"Not a thing. All of us—the police, the custodians and myself—searched the boys and that entire rear hall. There wasn't much to search, really. We even took a look in the main hallway. Nothing."

"What about the lockers?"

Guthrey shook his head. "I opened all of them with my master key," he said. "Nothing but books and papers—nothing that would account for Mr. Crofton's injuries. One locker looked suspiciously as if the boys had been rifling it when Mr. Crofton caught them but—"

"You can't prove the boys were in any of the lockers though, can you, Mr. Guthrey?" asked Bankhead.

Guthrey shook his head.

"What were the boys carrying?" asked Mr. Strang.

"Nothing dangerous. Luke was empty-handed. Bradley had a paper bag filled with gym clothes and a pair of sweat socks. He told us he was taking them home to be washed."

"And their shoes?" Mr. Strang knew he was grasping at straws.

"Sneakers on both of them. Besides, they were tight-laced when the custodians caught them."

"So there you are, Mr. Strang," said Bankhead. "Regardless of appearances it would have been *impossible* for either Bradley or Luke to have inflicted those injuries on Mr. Crofton. Don't get me wrong, I feel sorry for the young man. But unless you can find a weapon I think you'll have to agree that—"

"No, Mr. Bankhead, I don't have to agree to anything. If Mr. Crofton was struck with something I'll find it."

"I wish you luck, Mr. Strang." With a sardonic smile Bankhead rose and turned to Guthrey. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm very busy. The hearing, as I understand it, will be next Monday in the board room. See you then, Mr. Strang."

Bankhead left the office and Mr. Strang knocked the dottle from his pipe as he started to get up.

"Don't hurry, Leonard," said Guthrey. "I want to talk to you."

Mr. Strang sank back into the chair.

"Leonard," began Guthrey haltingly, "the teachers will listen to you. I want you to explain my position in this

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distressing matter. I know there's going to be a lot of talk about the five days' suspension. But it's all I have the power to do. Any further measures can be taken only with the approval of the district superintendent. I called Superintendent Weyland three times today, practically begging him to let me take those two boys out of school permanently. But he won't budge until the Board has its hearing."

"In other words you did everything you could," said the teacher.

"Yes. Now my hands are tied. Unless you can find whatever it was they used to hit Mr. Crofton, Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs will be back in school next week, and they'll be laughing up their sleeves at the whole teaching staff. Find that weapon, Leonard, or life around here won't be worth living."

After school the following day Mr. Strang remained to see Jesse Yates, one of the custodians who had belatedly come to the rescue of Mr. Crofton. In answer to the teacher's question Jesse just shook his head.

"Honest, Mr. Strang," he answered, "us guys and the cops checked out those halls with a fine-tooth comb, looking for a club or *something* those kids might have used to clobber Mr. Crofton. It didn't take us long; I mean, where's to look? The floors are terrazzo and the walls are tile halfway up and then cement. There ain't really much of any place to hide something like a club."

"Okay, Jesse," said the teacher. "I just wondered if you'd noticed anything."

"Nope. Neither did any of the other guys. I asked 'em. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Unless—"

"Unless what, Jesse?"

"Well, you might think this kinda weird, Mr. Strang, but when I was running down the hall after I heard the fighting, suddenly it got awful quiet. I guess that's when Mr. Crofton went down for the count. It was right after that I thought I heard something."

"What, Jesse? What did you hear?"

"That's the funny part. You know, my kid's got a pair of roller skates. And right out in front of our house is a piece of sidewalk that makes a hollow sound when the skates go over it."

"But what's that got to do with—"

"That's the kind of sound I heard. It wasn't as loud, but it sounded like my kid skatin' over that part of the sidewalk."

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That evening, at the house where he rented a room from Mrs. Mackey, Mr. Strang lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking of roller skates. But how do you hide a roller skate? A little spot of light high up on one wall caught his eye. He looked out the window, but the night was completely dark. Then where—

He turned out the lamp next to his bed. The spot of light disappeared. When the lamp was turned on again, the spot returned. Odd. The teacher glanced across the room at the bureau. Of course. Above the bureau was a large mirror. The spot of light on the wall was nothing more than a reflection of his own lamp. A line from the physics textbook flashed through his mind: "Incident light striking a flat reflective surface at any angle will be reflected at an equivalent angle."

The angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection. The scientific principle worked for light, for sound waves, for— As he thought of these words, a vision of the corner hall where Mr. Crofton was struck down popped into the teacher's mind.

With a whoop he bounced off the bed, skittered downstairs, and grabbed the telephone, startling Mrs. Mackey who was watching an old Joan Crawford movie on TV. After consulting the telephone book he dialed the number of the Aldershot Bowling and Billiard Academy . . .

The hearing on Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs was called to order in the board room of Aldershot High School on Monday evening at eight o'clock. The meeting was closed; attendance was limited to those having an immediate connection with the case.

At one side of the room, behind tables set in the shape of a crescent, sat the Aldershot Board of Education—seven men and women elected by the people of the community to determine the educational policies of the district. With them was Alvin Beaney, the district's legal advisor, and Lawrence Weyland, Superintendent of Schools.

In folding chairs facing the Board were the participants in the hearing. On the left were Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs, accompanied by their parents, in huddled conversation with Boyd Bankhead, the lawyer from FREE. Opposite them were Mr. Strang, Marvin W. Guthrey, Jesse Yates, and a fourth man whom the science teacher introduced as Mr. Patrick

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Haliday, proprietor of the Aldershot Bowling and Billiard Academy. A secretary occupied a table in one corner to keep a record of the proceedings.

Board President Frederick Landerhoff rapped his gavel for order, and Superintendent Weyland rose. A short rotund man, he peered owlishly over his glasses and began to speak.

"This hearing," he said, "is being held in regard to events which took place in the high school last Tuesday. Certain facts can be agreed on. Mr. Crofton, a teacher, did discover the two students, Bradley Sontag and Luke Burroughs, in the rear hallway just before six o'clock. In the course of subsequent events Mr. Crofton received severe injuries. Are we in agreement so far, gentlemen?" He looked from Bankhead to Mr. Strang, both of whom nodded.

The superintendent went on in a voice as dry as an autumn leaf. "Mr. Bankhead, representing the boys, maintains that the injuries were accidental—that Mr. Crofton, in attempting to remove the boys from the building, slipped and hit his head against a locker door or the floor, and in a similar way received injuries to other parts of his body. Mr. Strang, in behalf of Mr. Crofton, alleges that he was deliberately and repeatedly struck by the boys. May I say for the record that each Board member has the doctor's report, listing Mr. Crofton's injuries.

"If the Board of Education finds at the conclusion of this hearing that the injuries were indeed accidental, the boys will be reinstated in school without delay. If, on the other hand, the Board rules that the injuries were deliberately inflicted, it has the power to expel the boys. In addition, the Board has the authority and the duty to turn any evidence of illegal action over to the police or the District Attorney for possible criminal action. Naturally, any ruling of this Board may be appealed through the courts or to the Commissioner of Education. Any questions?"

There were none.

"This is a board room, not a courtroom," Weyland continued. "Therefore I'd suggest a certain amount of informality. We're interested in facts, not legal niceties. Mr. Bankhead, I believe you asked to begin."

Bankhead got to his feet and honored the Board members with a charming smile. "Thank you, Dr. Weyland," he purred in a mellifluous tone. "Ladies and gentlemen, my speaking first is, as your superintendent indicated, somewhat irregular. Usually it's up to the prosecu-

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tion to prove that a crime has been committed before the defense begins its case. But in this instance the entire position of my—shall we say, opponent? —rests on a single supposition which I will deal with in a moment."

Bankhead reached into his brief case and removed a sheet of paper. "I refer you," he said, "to the doctor's report which Dr. Weyland mentioned earlier. It states that in his opinion Mr. Crofton was beaten with a club or blackjack of some kind. But that, to use his own word, is only an opinion." He looked across the room at Jesse Yates.

"Mr. Yates, how long would you say it was between the time Mr. Crofton slumped to the floor and the time you reached the area where he and the boys were?"

"I dunno. Maybe ten seconds."

"Ten seconds. And did you find any sign of a club or other weapon?"

"Nope."

"Did any of your assistants find such a weapon?"

"No, but—"

"Just answer my questions, please. Did Mr. Guthrey or the policemen he called in locate anything?"

Jesse Yates shook his head.

"And now, Mr. Yates, would you tell us what the boys—specifically Bradley Sontag—had with them?"

"A bag. A paper bag."

"What was in the bag?"

"Gym shorts and a T-shirt. A pair of sweat socks, too."

"That's *all* they had?"

"Uh huh."

"And you searched the hall thoroughly?"

"We looked, yeah. But we didn't find nothing."

"Thank you. That's all." Bankhead turned to the Board. "There's my argument in a nutshell, ladies and gentlemen. While it may sound odd that a fall could produce the injuries Mr. Crofton suffered, that's what *must* have happened—unless you're about to conclude that these two youngsters roughed up Mr. Crofton by slugging him with a T-shirt." With a smile Bankhead sat down.

For a moment there was silence in the room. Weyland turned to Mr. Strang. "If I may be allowed an observation," said the superintendent, "Mr. Bankhead has presented a rather convincing argument in favor of the boys' innocence. I believe the ball's in your court, Mr. Strang."

His joints creaking almost audibly, Mr. Strang got to his feet. Whipping off his black-rimmed glasses he slid them into a pocket of his jacket. "Dr.

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Weyland, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "a teacher in our schools has been beaten unmercifully. He may die. For that I ask that the perpetrators of this outrage should be punished. But I don't ask this in a spirit of vindictiveness. I ask punishment only so that the next individual who takes it into his head to resort to violence will be forewarned that he may not do so with impunity. I ask it so that the staff of the Aldershot school system may perform their function as teachers without fearing for their safety or their very lives.

"You will note that I did not say Mr. Crofton was accidentally injured or that he slipped and fell. I said he was beaten! And to make that fact perfectly clear I intend to produce the weapon that Mr. Bankhead claims is nonexistent."

There was a murmuring among the members of the Board. Mr. Strang reached into his own brief case and removed a white cotton sock which he threw onto the table in front of Weyland.

"A gym sock," he said, "like the ones Bradley Sontag was carrying in his paper bag. I have the mate to it here." In his left hand he held up a similar sock by the toe.

"The sock in front of you is harmless, isn't it? Go ahead, pass it around. Feel how soft it is. It couldn't hurt a mouse, to say nothing about a human being. But what about this one?"

Grasping the ankle of the other sock in his right hand he raised it over his head and brought it down on the table. Crash! It struck with tremendous force, leaving a dent in the wood.

Fred Landerhoff looked at Weyland and then at Mr. Strang. "What have you got in that sock?" he asked the teacher.

Without answering, Mr. Strang tipped the sock upside down. Out rolled a ball about two inches in diameter.

"A pool ball," said Mr. Strang. "It would make quite a dent if it hit you in the head, wouldn't it, Mr. Landerhoff?"

"Just a second," interrupted Bankhead. "Just where would either of these boys get a pool ball?"

"I'm glad you asked," replied the teacher. "Mr. Haliday, would you answer that?"

"Sure." The owner of the Aldershot Bowling and Billiard Academy leaned forward in his seat. "A week ago tonight young Sontag was in my place shooting a few games. When he left, one of the balls from his table was missing because I had to get a new one for the next

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customer. We lose quite a few of 'em that way. I know the kids are making blackjacks by putting 'em in socks, but I dunno what to do about it."

"But no one found a pool ball in the hall," protested Bankhead.

"I'll get to that," said Mr. Strang. "But first, I'm going to take this ball and step out into the hallway. Jesse, I want you to listen carefully. Tell me if you hear anything familiar."

Mr. Strang walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind him. Everyone listened intently, and then a soft whirring could be heard.

"Roller skates!" breathed the custodian.

"No, Jesse," said Mr. Strang, reappearing in the doorway. "That's the sound you heard the day Mr. Crofton was beaten. It's the sound of a pool ball rolling across the terrazzo floor of the hallway."

The teacher entered the room, this time carrying a large board on which was mounted what looked like an architectural drawing. He set it up on a chair so that it faced the members of the Board.

"I have here," he said, "a scale drawing of the section of the second-floor hall where Mr. Crofton was found. It's as near perfect as the best student in our mechanical drawing class could make it. You'll notice it shows both the main hall and the rear hall that branches off it. Mr. Crofton and the boys were in this section." He indicated the cul-de-sac with a pencil.

"If a ball such as the one I've showed you were rolled anywhere in the rear hall it would have been found," Mr. Strang continued. "But suppose it were rolled in the direction of the main hall?"

"Why, rolling past that corner it would hit the far wall of the main hall," said Weyland, "and bounce off."

"Correct. Now tell me, Mr. Haliday, in the game of pocket billiards, what do they mean by a bank shot?"

"Why, that's a shot that bounces off a cushion—the side of the table—before it goes into a pocket."

"And is there any rule about how those shots should be played? Assuming there's no English on the ball?"

"Yeah. Whatever angle it goes into the cushion at, it'll come off at the same angle. With a little practise you can make the shot every time. Well, almost every time."

"The scientific principle is that the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection," explained the teacher.

"No kiddin'? I didn't know I

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was that much of a scientist."

"Now," continued Mr. Strang, "I believe we've ascertained that a pool ball rolled out of the rear hall into the main hallway would rebound from the wall at a predictable angle. Then, depending on the position from which it started, the ball would roll across the hall and strike the far wall somewhere between here"—he placed an X on the diagram—"and here." Another X.

"But why wasn't it found?" asked Landerhoff.

"I think Jesse Yates can answer that. Jesse?"

"Well, I—hey, wait a minute! There's a door between them two X's—a door to the broom closet."

"And wouldn't the door to the broom closet be open while you were working after school?" asked the teacher.

"Sure. We gotta get rags and water and—you mean the ball's still in there some place?"

"That's right, Jesse." Mr. Strang turned to Landerhoff. "I believe that whoever clubbed Mr. Crofton rolled the ball away from him just to get rid of it. It rolled out into the main hall, bounced off the far wall, and luckily—or unluckily, as the case may be—went into the broom closet."

"But isn't it odd," said Bankhead, "that none of the custodial staff found it there all week."

"Mister," said Jesse Yates. "You oughtta see one of them closets. They're jammed to the ceiling with all kinds of cleaning supplies. We might never find a thing as small as a pool ball unless we was 'specially looking for it."

"Then if Mr. Strang is right it should still be there," said Weyland.

"Of course there's been an entire week since Mr. Crofton was injured, during which time anyone could have planted a ball in the closet," objected Bankhead.

"Funny thing about pool balls," mused Mr. Strang. "They're hard and shiny—have just the right surface for taking fingerprints. If there are any on the ball we'll not only be able to eliminate the idea of planted evidence, we'll be able to tell which of the two boys clubbed Mr. Crofton."

"What are we waiting for?" said Landerhoff. "Let's take a look in that broom closet."

They found the pool ball far back between two boxes of paper toweling . . .

A few days later Art Mickel met Mr. Strang in the faculty room. "Congratulations again, Leonard, on a fine job," he said. "You'll be happy to hear

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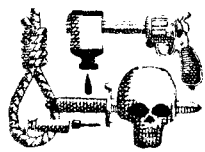
that Murray Crofton's coming along better every day. And whichever of those boys actually slugged Murray, he'll be treated as a juvenile offender—"

"You can hold the congratulations, Art," replied the teacher with a sigh. "I'm sick to death of this whole rotten mess. You see, the prints on the pool ball belonged to Luke Burroughs."

"So?"

"Luke was sixteen two months ago. He's no longer considered a juvenile offender. Right now he's in the county jail, awaiting trial."



INDEX TO VOLUME FIFTY-SEVEN — JANUARY-JUNE 1971

(Continued from page 161)

MAYBERRY, FLORENCE V.: The Beauty in That House — May 53

MCNEAR, ROBERT: Death's Door — May 78

MR. X: The Will-o'-the-Wisp Mystery (Part One: The Pawn) — April 6

The Will-o'-the-Wisp Mystery (Part Two: The Rook) — May 6

The Will-o'-the-Wisp Mystery (Part Three: The Knight) — June 130

MORLEY, MCGARRY: Testimony of a Witness — March 106

OLSON, MURIEL LUDLOW: In No Other Place — June 67

PEIRCE, J. F.: The Total Portrait — April 98

PIERCE, JOHN: The Pig Sticker — Jan. 108

POWELL, JAMES: The Plot Against Santa Claus — Jan. 135

The Gobineau Necklace — March 6

POWELL, TALMAGE: The Nylon Stocking Bandits — Feb. 36

ROBERTS, E. E.: Mug's Game — Feb. 49

Where There's Smoke — May 99

ROSENTHAL, CAROLE: A Specialist in Still Lifes — Feb. 92

SELZER, RICHARD A.: A Single Minute of Fear — Jan. 72

STIRPE, DANTE: Macdougal Street Blues — Feb. 102

Bad Spot — June 98

THIELEN, PAUL: Where There's a Will — May 66

TREAT, LAWRENCE: An Accident in Hudson Heights — Feb. 25

Crime at Red Spit — April 122

Jackpot — May 21

TYRE, NEDRA: Recipe for a Happy Marriage — March 73

WELLEN, EDWARD: Broken Trail — March 53

WHITE, HAYDEN: The People Next Door — April 64

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ALDRICH, ROBERT S.: Fox and Geese — Jan. 83
The Blue and Gray Club — June 44
BARRETT, MARY: Death out of Season — Feb. 110
BENTLEY, PHYLLIS: Miss Phipps Exercises Her Metier — Feb. 126
BLACK, TREVOR: An Incident at Devil's Rock — Feb. 18
BRANDNER, GARY: All Debts Off — April 80
The Stray Bullet — June 126
BREEN, JON L.: Green Gravy for the Blush — March 52
The Fortune Cookie — May 108
BRITTAIN, WILLIAM: Falling Object — Feb. 136
Mr. Strang Lifts a Glass — May 148
Mr. Strang Finds an Angle — June 145
CARR, JOHN DICKSON: The Jury Box — Jan.-Feb.
The Jury Box — April-June
CARROLL, MICHAEL J.: Man and Boy — April 91
CHRISTIE, AGATHA: The Unbreakable Alibi — Jan. 58
Finessing the King — March 61
Double Sin — May 119
CREASEY, JOHN (see MARRIC, J. J.)
DAVIDSON, AVRAM: The Unknown Law — Jan. 91
DEFORD, MIRIAM ALLEN: No Loose Ends — April 33
ECKELS, ROBERT EDWARD: Only Bet on a Sure Thing — Jan. 123
Game with One Rule — April 147
Vicious Circle — June 35
FERRARS, E. X.: Ashes to Ashes — April 110
FISH, ROBERT L.: Instead of the Wall — April 42
FREELING, NICOLAS: Van der Valk and the Two Pigeons — Feb. 12
GARCIA, LOIS: Death Comes to — May 117
GARDNER, ERLE STANLEY: The Clue of the Runaway Blonde — March 16
GILBERT, ANTHONY: When Suns Collide — April 20
GILBERT, MICHAEL: The Peaceful People — March 112
The Wrong Fox — June 74
GINGOLD, EUGENIA KLEIN: The Peacock — Jan. 50
GOTTLIEB, KATHRYN: The Gun — Jan. 34
GRAY, LEN: Adventures of Herbie and Big Sal — June 109
HARRISON, MICHAEL: A Study in Surmise — Feb. 58
HENRY, O.: Tictocq, the Great French Detective — May 48
HOCH, EDWARD D.: The Spy and the Diplomat's Daughter — Jan. 20
End of the Day — Feb. 147
The Theft of the Dinosaur's Tail — March 147
The Way Out — April 134
The Spy and the Nile Mermaid — May 132
The Theft of the Satin Jury — June 17
HOFFMAN, HERMINE: Aren't All Cops Dumb? — Feb. 80
HOLDING, JAMES: Mystery Fan — May 40
KEATING, H. R. F.: The Old Haddock — June 6
KENNEDY, VERONICA M. S.: Spot the Story — March 89
KERSH, GERALD: Gambling Fever — Jan. 155
LAFFERTY, R. A.: "Enfants Terribles" — June 53
LEWIS, RICHARD O.: Showdown — Feb. 116
LITTKE, LAEL J.: The Bantam Phantom — May 34
LUTZ, JOHN: The Real Shape of the Coast — June 115
MACDONALD, JOHN D.: Dead on Christmas Street — Jan. 6
He Was Always a Nice Boy — March 47
MARRIC, J. J.: Gideon and the Pigeon — Feb. 6
MATHER, BERKELY: The Rajah's Emeralds — April 69

(Continued on page 160)

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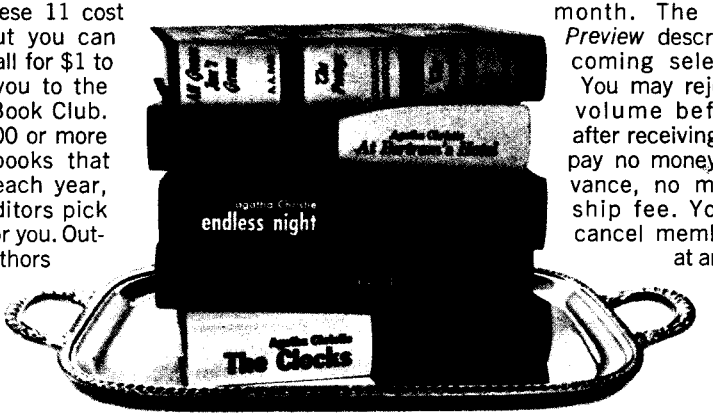

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